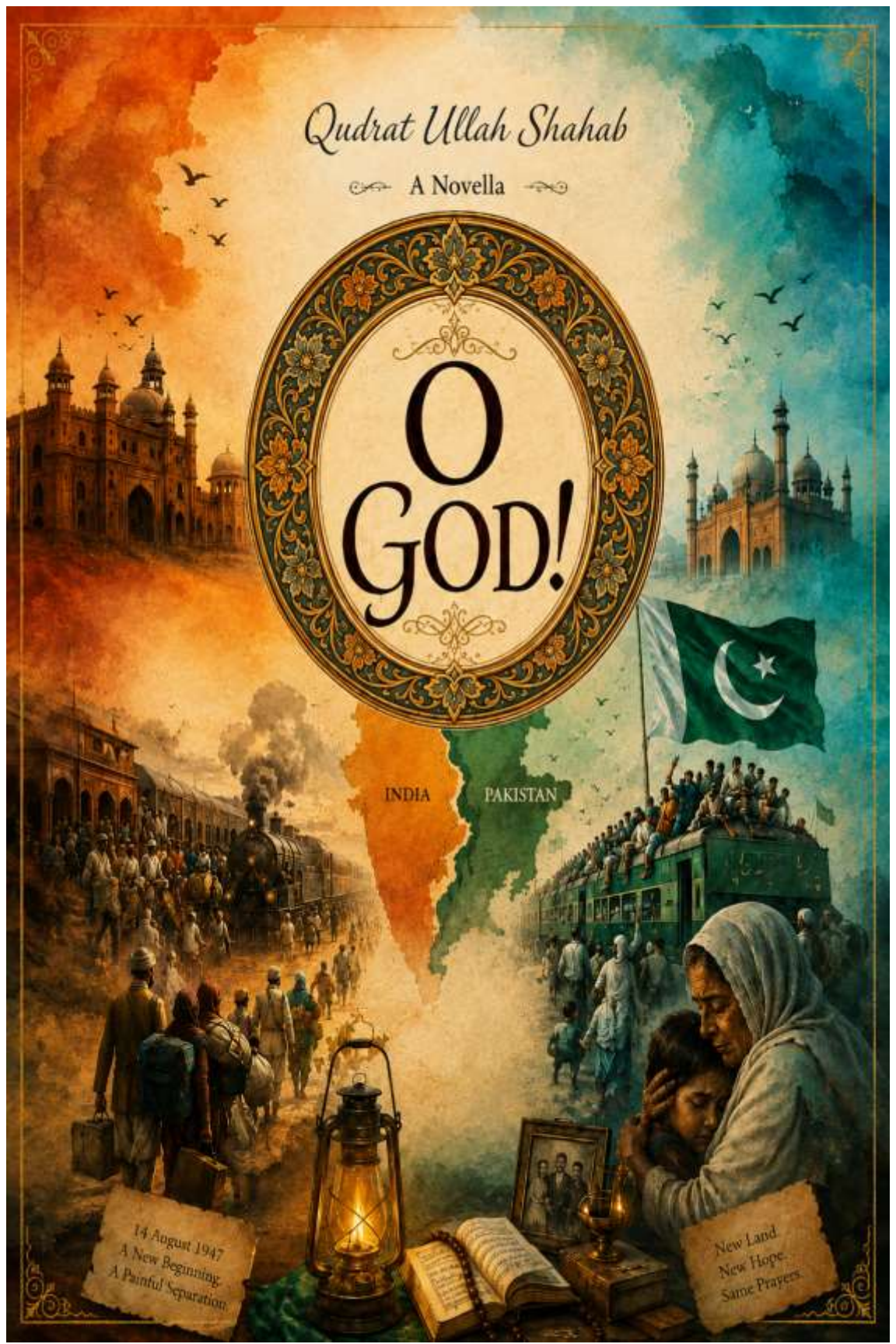
Qudrat Ullah Shahab
A Novella
O GOD!
INDIA
PAKISTAN
14 August 1947
A New Beginning
A Painful Separation
New Land
New Hope
Same Prayers

PUBLICATION AND EDITION NOTE

Author: Qudrat Ullah Shahab

Original title: Ya Khuda

Original publisher: Sang-e-Meel Publications, Lahore

Original edition represented in the supplied text: 1999

ISBN of the represented Urdu edition: 969-35-0548-4

English Edition

To the refugees
who are still among the living,
though you have no consciousness of their life.

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THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

♦

It was September 1947, and an unbroken procession of wounded caravans—hacked and battered on their way out of India—kept arriving. Those who had come earlier stood in their thousands at the Wagah border, waiting for those who were still to come. Someone's mother, someone's father, someone's brother, someone's son had vanished into the boundless distance beyond Wagah. For most, the waiting proved a mirage. Some received only the heart-rending news of how their loved ones had met their end. A fortunate few did find their shattered, ruined kin—but they were few indeed. The exhaustion on the faces of those hopeless, ill-starred watchers was a sight to behold.

I too was among those who waited. Waiting for my cousin, Naimat Ullah Shahab, had turned my eyes to stone. Naimat Ullah was not merely my cousin; he was the companion of my childhood, with whom I had raised heaven knows what storms at the school in Chamkaur. He was now an English master in a village school and had been separated somewhere along the way from his delicately featured wife. Whether he was alive, numbered among the slain, or lying in some camp grinding his heels against the earth, I knew nothing. All I knew was that I waited for him.

Blood is a strange bond: even when broken, it refuses to break. At last, one day, he came—but I did not recognise him. Searching every face in the crowd, I passed him two or three times. In the end, he himself called out, 'Qudrat!'

This was another Naimat Ullah altogether. In place of that graceful, high-spirited young man stood a skeleton wearied by centuries, his clothes steeped in blood, his face buried in dust. I asked, 'Naimat, where is your wife?' He burst into tears and pointed to the woman sitting beside him. Her face was a field of scars, as though the skin of that once-radiant countenance had been branded with red-hot iron rods. And that, in fact, was precisely what had happened.

That woman of courage and honour had branded her own face so that the hunters who prowled the camp might spare her from their lust. Had she not

disfigured it, she would not have been on this side of Wagah then; by that time, perhaps, her whole body would have been branded. Naimat Ullah had come to this pass because a band of heroes had dissolved blue vitriol in the camp well. Some drank that elixir of life and became immortal in the camps. Naimat was among those whose intestines the draught had shredded. Within a few hours of reaching this Promised Land, he laid down the burden of life.

His chaste wife followed him on the third day; and I, who had waited so long, returned to Karachi empty-handed.

In those days I lived in a bungalow on Lawrence Road. Its lights burned all night, and all night I sat writing this story: the story of Naimat Ullah; the story of my village, Chamkaur; the story of Dilshad, daughter of Mullah Ali Bakhsh of that village. The camps I have described I saw in Lahore. The many 'brothers' who hunted their refugee sisters—whose faces appear in O God!—the clerics, the servants of the people, the leaders of the nation, the politicians: all were real persons. I have not given their names.

One of them, indeed, God later raised to the rank of Minister of State. God bestows honour on whom He pleases; He alone knows the wisdom of His ways.

Nor was the ending of this story invented by my mind. My sinful eyes saw it in Karachi's Eidgah ground, where the homeless had pitched their encampment. There I saw Dilshad—or women bearing her name—frying and selling fritters. One would say to the woman beside her, 'Sister, keep an eye on my child while I go and fetch the flute,' and then set off with someone to 'fetch the flute'. Those fritters continued to be fried and sold for years; perhaps some are still being sold. Their children, now promising boys of thirteen or fourteen—porters, labourers, or beggars—have become citizens of this Promised Land.

The year 1947 is not over yet.

Nor has the story behind this story come to an end.

After Karachi, I was posted to Lahore as Director of Industries. One day the post brought me a torn, old, yellow envelope. The handwriting was utterly unfamiliar. I opened it. It contained the tale of a girl who lived alone, friendless and without protection, in the refugee shanties near Ichhra.

She wrote: 'My body was branded, but I reached this side. To me this soil was the land of Paradise, and every Muslim here seemed a tender-hearted brother. But these brothers too proved hunters. Such has been their hospitality that, thanks to it, I am now a patient of tuberculosis and have not many days left. I can read a

little. A copy of O God! came into my hands and I read it. I only wish to say that, even after becoming Dilshad, I could not become dil-shad—glad of heart. I am one of those helpless women who cannot merrily fry fritters, cannot go out to "fetch the flute", and who exist in this sacred land by the hundreds—perhaps by the thousands.'

So she wrote.

I owned a long Chevrolet in those days, a car whose price and prestige were considerable. I left it on the road, some distance from the shanties, and—asking here, searching there—found my way to a hut of coarse sacking. Inside sat a girl in filthy clothes, with desolation in her eyes. A girl? She was a heap of ash; a dry branch in a desert to which some passing caravan had set fire before moving on.

We said little on the way. Once she drew a long breath and said, 'Shahab Sahib, I have ridden in cars longer and shinier than this. In the days when I lived in the camp, they would take me away in those very cars—and bring me back to the camp in them.'

The girl was treated. A small house was found for her, together with some modest means of livelihood. The incident slipped from my mind, and once again I went to Karachi to take up another appointment.

One day my orderly brought me a scrap of paper announcing that a gentleman wished to see me and that a veiled lady was with him. The gentleman's name meant nothing to me. I called them in and said, 'Forgive me—I do not recognise you.' Smiling, he gestured towards the woman in the burqa. She lifted her veil. Before me was a flame-cheeked woman with a complexion like pale gold. She said, 'I am Dilshad—the woman who lived in the hut at Ichhra, the one who could not become glad of heart. This is my husband. I have come to thank you, because I am among the living again.'

They dined with me that evening. The next day they disappeared once more into a population of a hundred million, and several years passed.

Only the other day—no more than a few months ago—I landed at Dhahran during a tour of the Middle East with the President of Pakistan. It is an oil centre and an important American military base. As custom required, we were introduced to local officials and dignitaries. Among them was a Pakistani gentleman wearing a silk turban. 'Shahab Sahib,' he said, 'do you recognise me?' I was embarrassed. He continued, 'I met you in Karachi, and this is my wife. You know her better than you know me.'

It was the same woman, yet she could scarcely be recognised. Her face held not only the radiance of youth but the repose, abundance, and inward peace of prosperity. She told me that they now had a three-year-old child.

Fourteen years after writing this book, I became convinced that—even if not after death—there is certainly a wheel of transmigration within this earthly life. Before the final death, a living human being dies many times and is many times born anew.

'For those slain by the dagger of surrender,
from the Unseen, at every moment, comes another life.'

When I weigh Dilshad's life against the bundles of hostile criticism printed about this book, that one life outweighs them all.

Many people were displeased with me when this book appeared, and I endured many taunts. But what do they amount to beside the bright, laughing, beautiful face I saw in Dhahran? Even this result, however, I regard as incidental. All I had meant to write was the story of my beloved Naimat Ullah and his delicately featured wife—for whom I stood waiting at the Wagah border for weeks, and in searching for whom I saw all that, despite a thousand efforts, my pen remains wholly unable to record.

Qudrat Ullah Shahab
September 1961

LORD OF THE TWO EASTS

In Thy World—Subjugated and Helpless

♦

'What are you staring that way for, you bitch? Is some husband of yours over there?'

With the point of his kirpan, Amrik Singh tickled Dilshad's ribs; then, seizing her left cheek, he twisted her face round from west to east.

Dilshad smiled. That smile had become her distinguishing gift. In childhood, her most successful weapon had been tears. A little whimpering, a little waah-waah, and she could obtain anything—from the milk hidden in her mother's breast to the barfi locked away in the cupboard. Now youth had endowed her smile with power. She discovered the force of this new enchantment when Rahim Khan, intoxicated by a single smile, swore that if the moon, the sun, or the stars themselves carried her away, he would leap across the immensities of earth and sky and wrest her back.

Rahim Khan was a liar. A cunning rogue. Never mind the heavens—he had lost her here on earth. Whenever she could escape notice, Dilshad would sit facing the qibla and, in imagination, bow her forehead at that threshold beneath whose hem, she had been told, lay an infinite world of mercy and grace. To the west stood the Kaaba: Allah Mian's own house. The thought of that house kindled in Dilshad's heart a radiant lamp of faith and hope. But Amrik Singh detested the west. Besides, some of the customs in this Sikh village were crooked enough already—bitter gourd grafted upon neem.

From noon until noon their nerves remained drawn like bows, and it seemed as though someone had threaded every child, youth, and old man in the village upon a live electric wire.

Amrik Singh's house stood behind the mosque. Within the mosque's shadow, a hideous fear was breeding. The rumour had spread through the village

that, as evening fell, strange and terrifying sounds rose from the mosque well—as though two or four goats were being slaughtered at once.

'The bastard!' Amrik Singh would say. 'Still bellowing after death. Throw a few more baskets of rubbish into the well and flatten him for good.'

'Oh, let it be,' his brother Trilok Singh would jeer. 'Mullah Bang is giving the call to prayer.'

'Under Khalsa rule, every faith enjoys perfect freedom.'

'Quite so,' Giani Darbar Singh would say, baring his teeth in laughter.

But Amrik Singh's wife was afraid. At night, when the mosque well split the silence with its roar, cold sweat drenched her from head to foot. Before her eyes rose the image of Mullah Ali Bakhsh, who had lived in the mosque cell: a frail body, a beard two handspans long, thick-lensed spectacles, an ungainly turban of green muslin, trembling hands, and swollen veins in his neck. Yet when he stood in the courtyard and gave the call to prayer five times a day, the mosque domes reverberated, and from Ali Bakhsh's thin, exhausted throat issued a high, womanly voice—as though many waterfalls, clinging to one another's skirts, were sounding together.

It rolled and echoed like a chain of cataracts.

The call to prayer greatly distressed Amrik Singh's wife. Once or twice might have been borne, but to hear the same words five times every day made her frantic. She had heard from the elders that the azan contained spells of black magic and that young women who heard it became 'call-struck'. If an unmarried girl fell under its spell, she might become barren; if a married woman did, her pregnancies would miscarry. Thus, for generations, the custom in Amrik Singh's household had been this: the instant the azan floated into the air, someone began beating a bowl with a spoon.

Another clashed a pair of tongs; one woman plugged her ears with her fingers; another fled into the back room. In this way the valiant family had always kept the wombs of its cherished daughters green and flourishing, safe from the effects of black magic.

Within Amrik Singh's wife, a hundred and twenty-five thousand Khalsas were growing—for in Sikh reckoning one Sikh counted as a hundred and twenty-five thousand men. Late at night, when the mosque well became a ghastly, monstrous echo in her imagination and began to belch, that brave army of Khalsas rioted in her belly. At times the well's cries rang in her ears with liver-

rending force. At times its mouth gaped wide in her imagination and sprang towards her. Always she feared that Mullah Ali Bakhsh was crawling up the wall of the well and would, in the blink of an eye, stand upon its rim—ready at any moment to 'call' her into ruin.

She lived in dread that his azan would strike her where she stood.

No Khalsa had yet made a home in the womb of Amrik Singh's sister, for she was still unmarried; but her heart was already occupied by a hundred and twenty-five thousand. At night, lying on her string-bed, she remembered the sweet ticklings behind the maize fields, when the hungry fingers of those hundred-and-twenty-five-thousand heroes had pierced her body through and through. A multitude of longings would surge into her breast, and in fantasy she peopled her body with young, powerful Khalsas. Then the heartrending roar of the mosque well would demolish the palace of her imagination, and suddenly she would feel—

—that from the well's profound depths Mullah Ali Bakhsh was crying out his black spells and barricading the passage of all the generations that might issue from her belly.

Amrik Singh was furious with both his wife and his sister. Cowardly bitches! Mullah Ali Bakhsh had long since been buried out of sight. The day the mullah sat on the rim of the well performing his ablutions, Amrik Singh himself had tossed him upon the point of a spear; Trilok Singh had tried his sword upon him; and Giani Darbar Singh had flung his quivering, blood-soaked body into the well with a crack.

And why speak of Mullah Ali Bakhsh alone? The whole village of Chamkaur had been cleansed. Those who gave the call and those who heard it had vanished. Some fled, some died, and upon many a neck the sacred kirpans of the Khalsa had bowed in prostration. Yet these cowardly, misbegotten women still went about hiding their wombs from the fear of those calls.

So when Amrik Singh's wife and sister awoke shrieking and beating their breasts, rage roasted his heart like meat over a flame. He would seize the fire-tongs and beat them bloody. By the time his hands grew numb, his arms tired, and the veins stood out upon them, he would shake the drops of sweat from his dense beard and rush like a madman to Dilshad.

As a man with chronic catarrh takes a pinch of snuff now and again to ease the discharge in his head, so the Khalsas of the village fled their fear-ridden wives and sisters and went to Dilshad to lower the pressure in their bodies.

Dilshad had been kept in the mosque because the roof of the cell had burned and fallen in. She still possessed both body and life, but her dearest possession was her father's rosary. Mullah Ali Bakhsh's hands had grown old turning those beads. The marks of his fingers were embedded in the round stones like the imprint of a supplicant. The tears of years of midnight weeping and dawn lamentation were strung through that rosary like pearls. Those few pearls alone kept the plundered shell of Dilshad's being from utter emptiness. All day she wore the rosary around her neck, hidden beneath her kameez.

But at dusk she buried it in some deserted corner, afraid that tongues steeped in bhang and liquor might lick away even the traces of her father's fingers and profane them.

Deep in the night she would sit weeping upon the rim of the mosque well. Her eyes grew fixed and fevered from staring into it, hoping for one glimpse of her father's turban floating below. Her ears wearied from listening, hoping that she might hear his final death-rattle once more—or that the dreadful cries which tormented all the women of the village might stray, by grace, into her waiting ears. But the well was dark and silent as a grave. Whenever a bat fluttered its wings inside, every beat sent sharp gusts of stench and corruption into the air.

For the hundred-and-twenty-five-thousand heroes, determined to keep Mullah Ali Bakhsh's throat closed even after death, had packed the well to the brim with filth and refuse.

Dilshad's existence was like a shattered star whose fragments wandered alone through the desolations of the sky. Heaven's whole array had been plundered. Sun and moon had hidden; the lamps of the stars had gone out; and she was left alone—friendless, helpless, pressed against the mosque door, terrified and bewildered. Yet through her the mosque had come alive again. Men came by turns, and when those valiant Khalsas sat beneath the mihrab, opened a half-bottle of liquor, and tore at Dilshad morsel by morsel, they seemed proud to be repaying—carefully counted—

—thirteen and a half centuries of calls to prayer and prostrations.

The mosque of Chamkaur became busier than the gurdwaras. Gradually, the village's married and unmarried women began to feel that, after Mullah Ali Bakhsh, his daughter was bent upon plundering their wombs. Beaten with tongs, they lay down upon their string-beds and slept; meanwhile their brave Khalsas spent the whole night bargaining with Dilshad over the generations yet to come.

Amrik Singh, Amrik Singh's father, Amrik Singh's brother—one Khalsa after another, a second after the first, a third after the second—came all night to pay furtive attendance at the mosque threshold, watching for an opening and measuring their chance. They devoured roasted liver and kidneys; platters of fried kebabs went round; buckets of liquor and bhang were mixed. And the seed of lineage which their wives laboured in a hundred ways to keep green, they scattered without restraint within the mosque walls. Then one day, all at once, Dilshad flowered like a mustard field.

When the news spread, the village seemed to catch fire. Wives shrieked and beat their heads. Unmarried girls wept until their eyes were swollen and stopped meeting their Khalsas in secret behind the maize fields. The well's roaring grew louder. Fit followed fit in the houses; tongs rang against tongs; pandemonium descended.

At first everyone agreed that Dilshad should be killed and thrown into the well before the child was born. Then Amrik Singh conceived a profitable plan—mangoes in hand and the stones sold besides. Early one morning he seated her in his bullock-cart, drove her to the nearest police station, and presented her as practical proof of his efforts to recover abducted Muslim women.

Station Officer Bhoo Ram warmly praised Amrik Singh's public service, awarded him a police certificate of gratitude, and promised to obtain a commendation from the Deputy Commissioner Sahib as well. Then the officer raised his spectacles and inspected Dilshad. Young, passably pretty, a little pale perhaps, but warm and yielding. Yet when his gaze reached her belly, his rising hopes suffered a violent blow. At first he thought that, if it were only a matter of ten or twenty days, he might keep her at the station. But Head Constable Duryodhan Singh worked out the arithmetic and reported that—

—three or three and a half months remained before her confinement. Station Officer Bhoo Ram was deeply disappointed. Even so, after dinner that night, when he lay on his string-bed in a thin vest and loincloth, he called Dilshad to massage his feet. When a thief is leaving, even his loincloth is worth taking. The pain in the officer's feet crept into his calves, then his knees, then the insides of his thighs, then around his hips; and, holding Dilshad's hand, he made her press each aching vein in turn. To Station Officer Bhoo Ram, desire was merely another name for relief. Whether thus or otherwise—what did it matter?

For Dilshad this was nothing new. During the past few months, life had so unravelled its coils around her that every morsel of her body had become a

dressing for other men's wounds. Whoever wished could apply it wherever he pleased, and each part of her body could offer, within moments, a cup of relief to men burning, panting, and restless. But how many abscesses festered in her own veins; how many stabbing pains; how many running wounds—if only—

—Rahim Khan had been there to see.

Dilshad was angry with herself too, for having disappointed poor Rahim Khan so many times without cause. Once, when the poor fellow had tried to kiss her by force, she struck him so hard on the head that her bangles shattered and lodged in his forehead. All that night she had tossed upon coals, wondering what punishment God and His Messenger might inflict upon Rahim Khan for that sin. Poor Rahim Khan!

Fifteen or twenty days later, when the pain in Station Officer Bhoo Ram's knees, hips, and back had somewhat subsided, he released Dilshad and sent her to the Ambala camp with Head Constable Duryodhan Singh. Along the road, pain repeatedly seized the head constable's hips and knees as well.

Dilshad treated his affliction with great diligence, and the ten-hour journey was completed safely and peacefully in ten or twelve days.

There were many girls in the Ambala camp, many women—young and beautiful, yet like broken stars whose sparks had died, whose galaxies had been plundered, whose radiance had been smeared with mud.

Every day army trucks arrived, unloading more girls and more women into the Ambala camp. These scattered, priceless beads from the rosary of honour and sanctity were being gathered again towards their centre. Yet the litany of praise to their own Most Glorious, their own Most Forgiving and Merciful, their own Pure Sustainer, their own Omnipotent Lord had not begun upon them. Camp Commandant Major Pritam Singh and his manly soldiers were still writing another scripture upon their dust-covered bodies. Dilshad, however, now enjoyed a kind of reprieve. Virtuous children are always a support to their parents; Dilshad placed immense trust in her unborn child, for—

—even before birth, it had taken its helpless mother under its protection.

A railway line ran beside the Ambala camp. In sunlight the rails shone like silver wires, and far, very far to the west, their glistening strands vanished among the lovely islands of dream. Their other end lay not in East Punjab, but in West Punjab.

West Punjab! At the thought of the west, a tiny lamp began to flicker in Dilshad's ashes.

In the west stood the Kaaba, Allah Mian's own house. But the other women in the camp said there was much else in the west: our brothers are there, our sisters, our mothers and fathers; there is honour there, and rest. Dilshad thought that perhaps Rahim Khan was there too. At the thought, every fibre of her body stirred, and she longed to grow wings, fly away, and rub the dust of that sacred land upon her tired and aching body.

A week, two weeks; a month, two months—the days passed, the nights went by, while the auspicious image of the west spread the light of hope through Dilshad's breast. The population of the Ambala camp continued to swell. Then, when Major Pritam Singh and his men had at last been fully sated, the train arrived for which the lamps of hope had remained alight. As Dilshad climbed into the carriage, she remembered Mullah Ali Bakhsh. He too had once boarded a train to go on Hajj, garlands around his neck, perfume upon his clothes, while the villagers accompanied him to the station with music.

With every rush of the train, the women's shattered vessels of glass rang together. With every turn of the wheels, another knot loosened from body and soul. Looking through the windows at telegraph poles racing backwards, they began to believe that they themselves were truly moving forward. Every span of earth slipping beneath them lifted them farther from East Punjab and brought them nearer to West Punjab. Whenever the train stopped, the whole universe held its breath; time ceased to move; and they feared that perhaps—

—great mountains had suddenly risen before the engine. When the train started again, their heartbeats awakened, the longings in their breasts revived, and they stretched their hands out of the windows, trying to touch the air that came from the west.

Ludhiana—Phagwara—Jalandhar—Amritsar. At every station another lock upon the women's lives sprang open. Songs asleep in their ashes began to wake. They hummed. They smiled. They opened their eyes wide and looked at one another, as though trying to forget a dreadful dream. One combed her hair. Another rubbed the grime from her teeth with the end of her dupatta. One shook the dust from her clothes. Another crooned lullabies to her children. Some pressed their heads together and sang.

Sweet, tender songs, brimming with love: ‘O Wearer of the Black Mantle, I have come to your city of Yathrib. Hide me within your cloak.

Make me the dust beneath your feet.' When the train left Amritsar station, someone said that only an hour and a half of the journey remained. Just ninety minutes more. The incredible thought swept over their bodies like the fierce intoxication of wine. To find the destination so near left them paralysed by feeling. Memories of the terrible months behind them returned like poison to their breasts. The horror of the past overwhelmed the lovely promise of the future. Suddenly they remembered their green villages; their young brothers; their frail, aged parents whose unburied, unshrouded bodies lay rotting in the streets—

—and their desolate sisters sitting in camps, waiting for angels to fold them within luminous wings and carry them away.

Somewhere far, far away, towards the west, they began to weep. Torrents of tears poured down their cheeks. Dilshad wept too—sobbing, choking—while the salt water of her tears ran over her lips like mountain springs. She wept and wept until a thick curtain of tears gathered her eyelids into its folds. A strange drowsiness, a strange intoxication, spread through every pore. She felt herself plunging through the bottomless waves of an ocean, while countless little serpents crawled over her body—crawled and crawled.

LORD OF THE TWO WESTS

In My World—Thy Sovereignty

♦

When she opened her eyes, the railway carriage was empty. A sweeper-woman was washing the floor with water. Beside Dilshad, a tiny baby girl was crying. The morning air bathed in the sun's virgin rays; birds hopped among the trees; pearls of dew shone upon the grass; the station bustled with life. By the window, a tea-vendor had set down his tray and was boiling milk.

Dilshad pulled herself up and sat leaning against the window. In a feeble voice she asked the tea-vendor, 'Brother, is this the west?'

The tea-vendor bared a row of ugly teeth and laughed. 'Why?'

'Do you mean to offer your prayers at this hour?'

When the sweeper-woman had finished washing the carriage floor, she demanded a four-anna coin from Dilshad for her labour. Receiving nothing, she poured out a stream of filthy abuse. 'The bitch has polluted the whole carriage! Couldn't she wait? Had to drop it on the way!' Then she fetched a sturdy male sweeper, and together they dragged Dilshad out of the compartment.

A luggage barrow stood on the platform. Dilshad sat down with her back against it. Opposite was a tea stall. Steam curled from a gleaming copper samovar, coil upon coil, like the tresses of a beauty floating upon the air. Beyond it stood a fruit shop: oranges and sweet limes, glowing like worked gold upon coloured paper; a split red pomegranate in a basket; great clusters of grapes hanging from the roof. Dilshad's throat was dry as a thorn. Her tongue was coated with dull clots and crusts of dirty saliva.

A strange fever smouldered in her belly. Needles of pain pierced her back, and her whole body throbbed and cracked like a ripe abscess.

Dilshad passed her dry tongue over her lips. Her tiny daughter, clinging to her breast like a little mouse, sucked and sucked at the milk.

At times she thought she must have slept through the night and been carried past the beautiful destination of the west. At others she imagined that Rahim Khan might be standing behind the station's towering building, waiting for her—or perhaps wandering lost among the crowds that moved to and fro across the platforms, searching for her.

With great effort she rose to draw nearer the crowd, but her knees almost snapped beneath her. A tremor ran through her calves, and, clutching her head, she sank back against the barrow.

Two handsome, well-dressed young men strolled hand in hand along the platform. One smoked a cigarette, the other a cigar. Whenever they passed Dilshad, they kept turning to look back at her. Gradually their circuit grew shorter and shorter until, at last, they stood directly before her. Dilshad's heart began to pound against her ribs. A strange, half-familiar web spread over her mind. In the mosque at Chamkaur, whenever a man stared at her, she would let her body go limp in helpless surrender, knowing that in the next instant—

—the hands of the watcher would tear and claw at her flesh. But since boarding the train she had held fast to the lovely expectations woven through her heart and mind by the thought of the west. Perhaps, she now imagined, these handsome young men were those tender brothers whose blood had drawn the women of the Ambala camp westward at every moment. A little fountain of joy danced in Dilshad's heart. She wanted to smile; but a storm of pain was raging through her body, and despite every effort she could not summon even a counterfeit smile.

Still, she gathered into her eyes all the tenderness that her aching, wounded body could collect and looked upon the young men with love.

'Anwar!' One of them blew cigarette smoke into the other's face and smiled warmly.

'Rashid!' The second young man returned the warmth.

Anwar! Rashid! Dilshad was intoxicated. The two names fell into her ears like drops of the water of life. For months she had yearned to hear such familiar names. The Anwars, Rashids, Mahmoods, Naseems, Khalids, and Javeds of her village had long since been erased. In their place, the names Shamsher Singh, Amrik Singh, Kartar Singh, Trilok Singh, Punjab Singh, Surlekh Singh, and Darbar Singh now writhed like dragons in her imagination. The poison of those names had entered every vein like blood; their stench lived in every pore; their savage ferment had settled in her bones as pain.

But now, hearing the names Rashid and Anwar, she felt as though she were bathing in the waters of Kausar—as though that pure, stainless stream were being sprinkled over her rotting body with the fragrance of rose and camphor. Pride lifted her fallen neck. Rays of hope and delight broke through her grief-stricken breast, and she beckoned the two young men nearer.

'Brother, what place is this?' Dilshad asked.

'Lahore,' said Anwar.

'And where are you going?' Rashid asked.

'Wherever fate carries me.'

'Good Lord!' Anwar whispered to Rashid.

'She's game, brother!' Rashid winked.

'Come, sister—come with us,' they said together.

When Dilshad pulled herself up by the barrow, her new brothers caught their first glimpse of their tiny niece.

'Hey!' Anwar sprang back in surprise.

'What on earth is that?' Rashid asked.

'A little girl, sir.' Dilshad hesitated and lowered her eyes.

'She's terribly small,' Anwar observed.

'Only one day old, sir.' What could Dilshad say to brothers, and what could she leave unsaid? 'Ugh—spit!' Anwar gagged.

'There is no power nor might save in God!' Rashid's stomach turned.

The two brothers barely kept themselves from vomiting and hurried away. On the opposite platform a beautiful woman in a bright shalwar kameez was walking by, her leaf-green dupatta floating over shapely shoulders. Anwar and Rashid leapt across the railway tracks and, hand in hand, set off in pursuit of her.

By noon the station's bustle had thinned. The heat gathered force in the sunlight, and the kindly rays of the sun began to warm Dilshad's festering body.

An Englishman and his wife were taking the sun on the platform. Their little boy played with his dog near Dilshad. When he saw her tiny daughter lying in the sunlight, waving her little hands and feet, his eyes widened with wonder. Shouting with delight, he ran to drag his mother over and show her the marvel.

'How wonderful, Mummy! How wonderful!' the child cried, his eyes stretched wide with amazement and joy.

Wrapped in a torn sheet, Dilshad's daughter thrust her tiny fists towards heaven, while her little feet kicked away both worlds of earth and sky. The English child clapped at the sight of this minute creature, danced around it, and repeatedly tried to snatch the living toy into his arms. His mother scolded him: one must not touch other people's things. The boy began to fret.

'We'll bring you a toy just like it,' his father coaxed. 'Liar!' the boy sobbed.

'Yes, yes, darling, we certainly shall,' his mother promised.

'When will you bring me one just like it?' The boy wanted the bargain sealed.

'Very soon, my son—very soon.' The father glanced at his wife's gown, which curved broadly over her belly. She blushed and turned her face away.

'Mummy, give this toy some chocolate!'

'No, darling, it cannot eat chocolate.'

'Then give it a lovely suit, Mummy.'

'Yes, my darling, we shall give it some cloth.'

'And money too, Mummy!'

'Yes, money too, my darling.'

The boy squealed and clapped again. When he had tired of the game, his mother gave Dilshad a piece of woollen cloth and five rupees. As they left, Dilshad silently blessed the child—the first angel of mercy ever to descend into her life. The moment money entered her hand, her severed bond with the world was tied anew. A tea-vendor came calling, 'Hot tea!' A seller of meat and bread set his tray beside her. And when Dilshad began to eat, a dog too sat before her, tongue hanging out.

It waited at her feet for a share.

On a nearby bench, two elderly gentlemen sat delivering opinions. One had a white beard, the other a henna-red one. For some time both had been curling their lips at the Englishman, his wife, and their child. When the memsahib gave Dilshad the woollen cloth and five rupees, the two gentlemen felt as though the foreign woman had seized their beards and given them a violent tug.

'There is no power nor might save in God!' one exclaimed indignantly. 'These bastards still think we live upon their scraps.'

'The fault is not theirs, my dear fellow,' the other pronounced. 'Why did this wretched woman not fling such degrading charity back in their faces?'

'God preserve us! We have won freedom, but not lost our taste for slavery.'

'And how should we lose it, brother? When meat and bread come free through the grace of such masters' shoes, who will shoulder the labour of freedom?'

'O bird of the celestial realm, better death than sustenance
that makes the pinions falter in their flight!'

The first gentleman recited the verse in a voice trembling with emotion.

The second too contributed several lines upon the grandeur of freedom and the sovereign self. When Dilshad had fuelled the hell of her stomach with four annas' worth of meat, three annas' bread, and two annas' tea, the two elders bestirred themselves and approached her.

'Woman, are you a refugee?' one demanded wrathfully, like a judge of ancient times addressing an adulteress.

'No, sir. My name is Dilshad.'

'So it may be—there is no power nor might save in God! We are asking where you have come from.'

'Where are you going, and what business have you here?' the second gentleman interrogated her.

If only Dilshad had known that the signpost to her destination could be found upon some road. In her imagination, the entire universe of the west was her destination. She had believed she was about to enter a vast fellowship in which every face would be her own. But here every brick demanded: Who are you? What are you? Is there money in your pocket? Is there freshness in your body?

'Go.'

'You are a refugee,' one elder decreed. 'Go to the refugee home. The daughters of a free nation do not live on scraps of charity—understand?'

'You are not a child. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.'

For a long time Dilshad sat wondering whether the elders were searching for some girl named Muhajir—Refugee—who had committed a mortal sin and run away from home.

But before evening, many people had called her by that same name, and every one of them advised her to go to the refugee home.

Muhajir-khana—refugee house—formed on the pattern of musafir-khana, a travellers' inn. Once, when Dilshad had gone to the city with her father, they had

stayed at Haji Musa's inn. It contained little cells. An innkeeper's wife was cooking black gram over a fire of cow-dung cakes. When Dilshad sat beside her on a mat to eat, the woman tempered her lentils with plenty of ghee and onions and served hot bread spread with fresh butter. Later, while Mullah Ali Bakhsh offered the night prayer, the innkeeper's wife drew her own string-bed beside Dilshad's and, for a long while—

—told her delicious stories: now the tale of a king with seven sons, now the adventure of a fairy princess, now the life-story of her own innkeeper husband. Several times she wept, several times she laughed. Even now, whenever Dilshad imagined the lively streets of a city, the image of Haji Musa's inn appeared upon the screen of her mind, together with that woman who sometimes cried, sometimes laughed, and sometimes laid pats of butter upon hot chapatis for Dilshad to eat.

Perhaps muhajir-khana was merely a corrupted form of musafir-khana, just as villagers called a hospital a post office. Perhaps city people called a travellers' inn a refugee house. But Dilshad did not much care for her new name. Muhajir—Refugee—what sort of name was that? Dilshad was a name rich with sweetness. It carried the memory of Mullah Ali Bakhsh, who had opened the Holy Qur'an for an omen and chosen it for her. Within that one name, too, the whole romance of Rahim Khan was set to verse. He would braid rhymes—abad, bedar, sayyad—around 'Dilshad' and sing love-drenched songs in a voice full of honey.

By the time she reached the refugee home, the tresses of night had spread across Lahore's shoulders. The officer sat in a tent with his register open. After a while Dilshad's turn came.

'Name?' The officer repeated the memorised question like a parrot.

'Dilshad.' 'Age?'

'Twenty.'

'Father's name?'

'Mullah Ali Bakhsh.' 'Living or dead?'

'Murdered.'

'Village?'

'Chamkaur.' 'District?' 'Ambala.' 'Married?'

'No, sir.' The officer stopped his pen and glared at her. 'Whose child is this?'

'She—she is mine, sir.' Dilshad stammered. 'I am married, sir. I forgot, sir.'

The officer's pen swung back towards the inkpot like a machine.

'Think before you speak. Husband's name?'

'Rahim Khan.' 'Alive or dead?'

'I do not know, sir. God grant that he is alive. May God add my years to his.' The refugee home occupied an ample tract, perhaps eight hundred feet long and five hundred wide: an open field enclosed on every side by barbed wire. For a roof it had the sky's lapis canopy; for lamps, the moon's lantern and the flickering lights of stars. In one corner stood the kitchen. Great cauldrons of lentils and meat simmered upon deep hearths dug into the ground. In the darkness, fire blazed around the pots as though—

—the corpses of gods were burning in the flames of funeral pyres. In the firelight the vast field of the refugee home stood revealed, as the crimson of clouds washed clean by evening twilight might spread like blood-dust over a graveyard. A mournful stillness lay upon the air; beneath it, a faint, almost imperceptible tremor in which the crushed desires of a million breasts and the innocent pulses of broken hearts quivered and shook. At every moment one feared that the artificial spell of silence and paralysis would suddenly shatter, and a mighty storm, an immeasurable earthquake, a monstrous cry would overturn—

—the whole order of earth and heaven.

It would bring all creation to a standstill.

Holding her baby to her breast, Dilshad walked as though testing each step before she set it down.

One walks so carefully through a graveyard, lest one's foot strike a sacred tomb. Some refugees had stretched sheets over bamboo poles to make little huts. Others sat beneath the open sky like unplastered graves—may heaven scatter dew upon your resting-place. Some possessed a sheet, some a blanket, some a quilt. Dilshad had neither sheet nor blanket nor quilt. She herself was a rag.

A worn and tattered remnant, all that survived of the garment of her maidenhood. Hundreds of such rags lay scattered through the refugee home. In every heart burned the flame of hope: now they had reached their beloved soil; now the dust of this sacred land would become balm upon their rotting sores; now its blessed water would wash their running wounds; now the radiance of its sun and moon would mend their torn hems.

Finding an empty patch, Dilshad stopped. A little way ahead, a very old man had made camp with two children: Mahmood, a boy of eight or ten, and

Zubaida, a girl of eleven or twelve. All three bent over an earthen bowl, eating bread. Mahmood kept asking, 'Grandfather, why is there no piece of meat in the curry today?' Zubaida defended the old man: one must not eat meat every day—it upset the stomach and put worms in the teeth. But Mahmood whined. Grandfather coaxed him; Zubaida scolded him. 'Shall I cut pieces from my own flesh and give them to you?'

The little sister rebuked her little brother with the gravity of an elder, and one felt that the guardian of this miniature family was not the grandfather but Zubaida. The girl's awareness was so sensitive and awake that at once she performed the duties of a tiny sister, a tiny daughter, and a tiny mother.

'Sit here, child. Is anyone else with you?' the old grandfather asked Dilshad.

'Anyone at all?'

'No, sir. There is no one with me.'

'Go and fetch bread from the kitchen. Have you a bowl?' 'No, sir. I have no vessel.'

The grandfather gave her an empty bowl of his own.

'The frost is severe, child. Have you any bedding?'

'No, sir. I have no bedding either.'

The old man looked long and compassionately at that desolate being. He too had arrived in precisely the same condition.

'There is a clothing office beside the kitchen. Ask them for a blanket.' Then he read the time from the stars. 'It is nine o'clock. Perhaps the store clerk is still awake.'

The cook gave Dilshad two pieces of bread and a bowlful of lentils. In the clothing office a dim lantern burned. Piles of quilts filled the tent. Layers of red, brown, and black blankets lay folded beneath a film of dust. In one corner were heaps of warm clothes—woollen sweaters, overcoats, heavy shawls. Wrapped in a red-and-white printed quilt, the store clerk lay upon a string-bed singing Iqbal's Complaint.

'Thy mercies rest upon the dwellings of the stranger;
when lightning falls, it strikes the hapless Muslim.'

When he saw Dilshad standing in the tent entrance, the melody slackened,
and he glared at her in profound irritation.

'The office is closed. Come at eight in the morning.'

'We have no covering. We shall die of the frost.'

'Nobody dies. Come at eight in the morning. The office is closed now.' Dilshad pleaded once more. The store clerk lost his temper.

'I tell you, go away quietly. I am a human being too—'

'—not a machine. Come at eight in the morning.' He curled himself again into his soft, warm quilt and resumed the Complaint.

> *'The lovers came and went, taking tomorrow's promise with them;*
> *now seek them by the lamp of the beloved's radiant face.'*
>
> *As the night deepened, the cold increased, until gradually it seemed that the whole universe had frozen. Gusts of icy wind struck the body like arrows and lancets; dampness from the earth pierced the flesh like poisoned thorns. Grandfather possessed one blanket. He spread half beneath Mahmood and Zubaida, laid them down, and drew the other half over them. He himself lay on the ground beneath a thin sheet, turning from side to side. Dilshad's teeth chattered. She had wrapped her baby in the piece of wool—*

—and held her against her breast. Now she lay down, now sat up, now rose and walked about. But in every posture the cold crept deeper through her bones like serpent-venom, and she feared that in the next instant she would freeze solid and fall like a block of ice.

A little way off, a young woman was trying by every possible means to transfer the warmth of her own body into the body of her four-year-old daughter.

They too had no blanket, quilt, or sheet. The child's breathing came in broken gasps. Little bells rang in her chest, as though far beyond the horizon a caravan of camels were moving on and on in search of a lost paradise—moving, moving, ever onward. As the cold intensified, the bells in the girl's chest rang faster. Her breath tightened violently, as though the angels of life and death had seized opposite ends of its thread and were pulling against one another.

The mother panicked. She was helpless, without resource. Rising, she surveyed the darkness. A black shroud covered the earth. Now and then the moon peered out from behind its quilts. Finding silence on every side, the woman crouched down. With the furtive eyes of a thief she looked about; then slowly, hesitating, shrinking with shame, she removed her clothes and wrapped her freezing, sick child in them. Lightning seemed to flare through the dark, and

the young woman's naked body called out to every particle of the universe: Look—look, lest this incomparable—

—moment pass unseen. You may have witnessed many secrets of earth and sky, but you will never forget the naked body of a mother whose clothes enfold her dying daughter; while frost bites hard, while heaps of warm blankets and quilts fill the store, while the store clerk lies wrapped in a quilt singing the Complaint. Her nakedness spread around them like an obscene curse. The soot of disgrace deepened the darkness of night. The stars closed their eyes and hid behind the clouds. The moon too could not endure the sight from between its quilts. A dense black cloud, scattered carelessly across the sky, drew itself together—

—and great tears began to fall from the eyelids of heaven.

Drop after drop after drop. Rain fell. The frozen wind sighed like a breath caught between numb teeth.

A faint tremor of life awoke across the field. Some children cried, some women raised an alarm, some men shouted them down; then silence returned.

The raindrops lodged in Dilshad's body like pellets from a gun. She felt the kirpans of Amrik Singh, Trilok Singh, Surlekh Singh, and Darbar Singh piercing her flesh once more.

The rain seeped even into the warm flannel, and the tiny life wrapped inside began to shiver. Dilshad thought that, if she asked Grandfather and laid her daughter beneath Mahmood and Zubaida's blanket, perhaps the poor creature might survive. She shook the old man's knee. He lay beneath his dirty sheet. She shook his shoulders, his arms, his neck; she pulled his hands. But Grandfather's earthen body had passed beyond the sensations of heat and cold. The blood of life had frozen and stopped in his veins, and his bones had stiffened in the cold like bars of iron.

He did not move.

When the first pale light of dawn broke, a marble statue gleamed silver in the refugee field. It was the naked body of the young mother who had wrapped her dying child in her clothes. Against her lifeless breast the little corpse clung as though it had only just begun to suckle. One might have thought a great artist had carved this exquisite group from marble. Raindrops shone like pearls upon the woman's taut, milk-white body; her dense hair lay coiled like black serpents; within her half-open eyes a thin film of water—

—had frozen, as though her tears had congealed together with her blood.

Several sweepers from the refugee home arrived carrying a bundle of blankets. One they threw over Grandfather, another over the woman's naked body, a third over the child; and so they went on, laying soft woollen shrouds over the corpses scattered across the field. Those still alive looked longingly upon their dead companions and envied them. Had not the thought of death held the terror of an unseen, unknown, incomprehensible reality, they would all willingly have died where they stood, so that the sweepers might lay woollen blankets over them too—

—and their trembling flesh and freezing bones might receive a little peace, a little warmth, a little rest.

Mahmood fretted: where had they taken Grandfather? Zubaida explained that he had gone to fetch Father and Mother. 'When will they come?' 'Very soon, my Mahmood. They must be on their way.' 'Where have Father and Mother gone?' 'Only for a little while, to meet Allah Mian. They will bring you splendid toys from His court: a glass spinning-top, a rubber ball, a clockwork motorcar, new boots, a peaked cap.' Mahmood's imagination invented question after question; Zubaida invented answer after answer to soothe him. And whenever Mahmood became absorbed in play—

—she turned her face away, hid it, and quietly emptied the grief from her heart.

The machinery of the refugee home ran like a bioscope. From morning until evening, scenes of every kind appeared upon its screen and passed away.

'The world before me is a children's playground;
day and night the spectacle unfolds before me.'

Great princes and nawabs arrived in all their splendour. Officials seated upon the loftiest chairs came. Begums came in whispering silk and brocade, blooming like flower-buds, intoxicated with beauty, fragrant with attar of rose and jasmine. They stroked the children's heads with kindness and stood beside the women, wiping away their tears.

They patted old and young upon the back, lending support to broken spines; then shining motorcars carried them away from the refugee home. One brought sweets, another distributed clothes, another served cauldrons of pilau and qorma. Whenever someone took an especially prominent share in this good work, pride

and delight coloured his face, and inwardly he thanked his Most Compassionate, Most Merciful Lord for creating, through His perfect power, such circumstances as had granted even this insignificant servant an opportunity to bestow charity according to his means. Dilshad imagined that, when some brave man heard the story of Mahmood and Zubaida—

—he would seize the store clerk by the ear and shoot him dead for giving Grandfather only one blanket in such bitter cold. She believed that, when men of rank, thunder, and high fortune heard her own Ram-story, their blood would boil; their honour would be grievously wounded; and they would shoulder their rifles and set out in search of Amrik Singh, Trilok Singh, Kartar Singh, and Darbar Singh. But listeners listened and tellers told. By day sweets and pilau were distributed; by night the sword of winter wind struck its blows; and the refugee home's bioscope continued to turn without pause.

One scene after another, a second after the first, a third after the second—without beginning or end: a continuous, intricate system of compassion, in which man restlessly desired to become the provider of man, and in that contest stood ready to play every move and wager every stake in order to outstrip the rest.

One gentleman was extraordinarily charitable. He wore an elegant suit, a tilted hat, green spectacles in gold frames; gold studs glittered in his front teeth, a pipe rested in his mouth, and rings set with rubies and sapphires weighed upon his fingers. He wandered for hours through the refugee home, listening to every story. To one person he gave money, to another sugar-drops, to another chocolate. Dilshad received his particular favour. One day he brought a handsome red woollen sweater for her daughter. The next he promised to search for Rahim Khan. A few days later he arrived with an Eid-message of life-giving joy—

—Rahim Khan had been found. The poor man was desperately weak, unable to walk or move, yet sustained beneath the burden of life by the memory of Dilshad. The world flowered crimson before her eyes. Blossoms sprang from the earth of the refugee home. The poison smouldering in her body turned to camphor and released a fragrance of musk. Concealing a multitude of desires within her pounding breast, she climbed into the car of Mr Mustafa Khan Seemabi. It sped onward; the streets of Lahore flowed past like coloured serpents.

This is Jinnah Garden. These are the walls of Fatima Garden. Here stands the statue of the Queen-Empress. These are the bright restaurants of the Mall. This is

Neela Gumbad Square. In that lane lies Anarkali's tomb. Here a church; there a mosque.

And here was Mustafa Khan Seemabi's splendid bungalow. In the servants' quarters a gramophone was playing.

> *'Adorn yourself to your heart's content today—*
> *for today is all you have.'*

> *Dilshad's heart beat dhak-dhak, and within that pounding ran the rhythm of an unknown rapture. Sitting in the veranda, she thought: perhaps Rahim Khan's feet have touched this ground; perhaps the air of this bungalow has held his enchanting breath. In her worshipful gaze, every grain of its earth became the dust of Mecca and Medina; from every brick rose a sacred mosque-minaret. A servant brought a plate of pilau, another of spinach and meat, another of peas and minced meat, and another of rice pudding scented with kewra.*

She did not know what she ate, or when. She was oblivious of the world and all it contained; her soul had become one long act of waiting to receive Rahim Khan. But hounds still tore at her body. Mustafa Khan Seemabi, dressed in a robe, circled her like a starving vulture. A bottle of Scotch whisky glittered on the table. Opening his arms again and again, he said, 'My darling, come to my breast. You have suffered greatly; you are very poor. But I am a rich man. For a few days I shall keep you like a queen.'

'Who knows where your Rahim Khan has disappeared? Perhaps he lies dead in some wilderness. Do not squander your youth in memory of an imaginary being. My darling, come—come to my breast. You are in your free homeland now.'

'You need fear nothing. This is our country—our free country. Long live Pakistan! May Pakistan endure for ever!' Mullah Ali Bakhsh's rosary hung at Dilshad's throat. Whenever Mustafa Khan Seemabi's tongue darted out and kissed its beads, Dilshad felt that a Muslim brother was kissing the Black Stone. In four days, when Mustafa Khan Seemabi had completed the rites of his pilgrimage, Dilshad returned to the refugee home. Little Mahmood was spinning a glass top. Stammering excitedly and clapping his hands, he told her that Sister Zubaida too had ridden in a motorcar to visit Grandfather.

Grandfather had sent this glass top, this rubber ball, these coloured sweets. Today she had gone again in the motorcar to see him. The car went choo-choo down the road. Soon she would return with money from Grandfather, new boots, and a peaked cap.

Lahore was no longer Lahore. It was Medina. And the people of Lahore were no longer merely Lahoris.

They were the Ansar—no, perhaps a degree more exalted even than the Helpers of Medina. Every day a new Rahim Khan was born for Dilshad.

Every day a new grandfather was born for Zubaida. Daughters found new fathers; sisters found new brothers. Body entered into kinship with body, blood into kinship with blood.

LORD OF ALL WORLDS

Why Should I Care for the World—Is It Thine or Mine?

♦

KARACHI

Dilshad put her face out of the window and looked. Saddar station was in turmoil. The human cargo of the Refugee Special poured from the train and gathered on the platform. The station was packed to suffocation; yet, before one's eyes, the crowd dispersed like clouds. A few porters, departing passengers, and ticket inspectors remained. In an instant that immense multitude of refugees sank like valueless drops into Karachi's boundless circumference—as a fierce wave of the sea carries away the straw and litter of the shore, as the sun's rays gather pearls of dew into their hem—

—as the intoxication of wine lulls trembling anxieties to sleep in a corner of the heart, or as the stench of a rotting corpse absorbs into its breast the fragrance of roses and jasmine. Manora Island glittered beneath rows of brilliant lamps. Clifton Beach lay bathed in the moonlight of the fourteenth night. Sea-waves teased the shore and played a languorous music; water striking the sandbanks flashed into the air like silver fountains. There was a delicate coolness in the breeze, a soft caress—

—and a sweet ache of life writhed across the beach like serpents drunk on wine.

Four young men were filling glasses with whisky and soda. 'Ah, Delhi!' One struck his breast and sighed.

'In this vast wilderness, Delhi returns to the heart. Alas, Delhi!' wailed another.

'Who, O Zauq, would leave the lanes of Delhi?' The third slapped his thighs in mourning. 'Ah, Delhi—the pull of your sacred dust!'

The fourth remained solemn. With the whisky glass sealed to his lips, he had entered meditation. When his companions' lamentation for Delhi grew especially loud, he started. 'Eh? This is still the same damned Karachi.'

'By God, all I saw was dream; all I heard was tale. What do I behold? Chawri Bazaar alive with bustle; Bibi Chand Jan's upper chamber; that moon-faced cupbearer approaching with the goblet in hennaed fingers—coming, bringing it, coming, bringing it. Ah Delhi! Ah Delhi! Ah Bibi Chand Jan—woe, Bibi Chand Jan!' The four lost themselves in the cadence of an eloquent elegy and rolled upon the cool sand, mourning their lost paradise.

A little distance away, a neatly groomed and rigorously pious elder chewed betel.

Several disciples sat before him upon folded knees. 'Delhi is gone; the people of Delhi are gone; everything is gone—yet nothing is gone.'

'Bring betel,' the elder commanded.

Betel was presented to him.

'The tobacco is good,' he judged. 'Where did you obtain it?' Someone submitted that it cost twenty-nine rupees a seer and had been ordered from Lucknow.

'Yes. As I was saying: Delhi is gone.' The elder recovered the broken thread of his discourse. 'The people of Delhi are gone. Why? Do you know why?'

The disciples pondered why. The question mark of why seemed stamped upon every face.

The elder supplied the answer. 'That Red Fort, that Jama Masjid, that Qutb Minar; those graves where the dust of holy men thirsts to hear two words of prayer; Ghalib's tomb; the luminous resting-place of the Shaikh of Shaikhs, Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya—all gone, all slipped from our hands. You will say it was our fate. I say it was our deeds—our own unspeakable deeds. Shall I tell you the destiny of nations? Bring betel.' Betel was brought.

'I shall tell you the destiny of nations: the sword and spear at first; the lyre and lute at last.' 'Damn you!' one of the whisky party roared at another. 'Chand Jan was mine. She loved me. She would not even spit upon your face!' The second young man began gathering soda bottles and empty glasses, preparing a practical reply.

Their two remaining companions were practising standing upside down upon one another's heads. A Parsi girl laughed at their antics, filling the air with a

delicious music, a tender vibration. She wore a bright bathing costume in which her slender body curved like a bow. The elder continued: 'Bring betel.'

Between the Chief Court and the Assembly Hall, Mahatma Gandhi's statue stood alert on guard, lest justice and politics come too near each other. Two cyclists stopped to inspect him. One tried to steal his staff, the other his spectacles. Failing in both attempts, one removed his Turkish cap and placed it upon the statue's head. They rode away delighted, having secretly converted the Mahatma to Islam.

A Hindu family was emigrating. Four camel-carts laden with possessions stood before their handsome bungalow: iron trunks, leather suitcases, wooden chests. Among them was a parrot in a cage, eating pea-pods. Whenever anyone passed, it regarded him through half-closed eyes as though saying, 'Well, you bastards, I am leaving too. Now let me see how you build your Pakistan.'

An orchestra played in the ballroom of the Qasriya Hotel. The manager came upon the stage and announced that half the evening's receipts would be donated to the Quaid-e-Azam Relief Fund. The audience applauded warmly.

'I am tired to death of Karachi,' said an exquisitely dressed begum, touching a glass of sherry to ruby lips. 'Darling, let us go to Bombay for a few days.'

Her companion was drinking champagne. 'Bombay too has died, Begum. The damned Congress is determined to turn that little Paris into a monastery. No whisky, no sherry, no gin, no champagne. I hear now they are plotting to ban the races as well.'

'Oh yes!' The begum suddenly remembered. 'A letter came from Professor Ghanshyam only the other day. Partition has left the poor man desperate. He has asked for a case of whisky. Do find some way to send it, darling.'

The secretary of one foreign ambassador whispered to the secretary of another: 'There are two things in Karachi I like very much.'

'I like three,' said the other.

'Parsi girls—and the burqas of Muslim women.'

'I like the women inside the burqas too.'

'By God, you have strange tastes. Who would want those consumptive creatures?'

'I would. By Jesus Christ, I adore that sickly beauty: fine blue veins beneath pale cheeks, a dusting of rouge over them—rose petals in autumn. Ah, I have never seen a lovelier combination. Boy! Two sodas, two whiskies.'

'Whether you pay or I pay, it is the same. Our two countries share one lofty ideal, and we shall make every effort to render that partnership permanent. To your health.' A Muslim editor was refreshing himself with lemon squash. Finding his chance, he cornered a major dealer in liquor and cloth.

'I hear that, since Pakistan was created, the consumption of imported liquor in Karachi and Lahore has trebled?' The editor began collecting material for an editorial.

'False!' the merchant denied with warmth. 'Utterly false. You journalists seize upon the strangest rumours. Trebled? We should be grateful if it had even doubled.' 'A pity,' the editor persisted. 'Is that not a disgrace for a new Islamic government?'

'Pakistan is the fifth-largest country in the world and the largest Muslim country,' the merchant tried to improve the editor's store of information. 'Is it not a disgrace for the largest Muslim country?'

The editor remained unshaken.

'Sir,' said the merchant after a long swallow of whisky, 'you are building a state, not a mosque.' 'Those black, black burqas,' the second secretary was saying to the first. 'Beneath veils of whispering red and green silk, round pale faces glowing crimson; shapely arms; tapering hands glimpsed through folds of silk—by the chastity of the Virgin Mary, I have seen nothing like them in your country. When I watch them casting lightning through the shops of Elphinstone Street, I long to fall at their feet—'

'—and let those delicate, weightless feet trample me beneath their kicks—trample me on and on. Boy! Two whiskies and soda,' called the first.

'This round is mine. Boy! Two sodas, two whiskies,' said the second.

'It is all one whether you pay or I do. Our brave nations have the same ideal. We shall assist Pakistan's wandering refugees in equal measure.'

'This two-anna coin is counterfeit,' the bus conductor said harshly. 'Change it.'

'I did not mint it,' the Punjabi passenger retorted. 'I did not bring this coin from Delhi or Lucknow. I shall certainly not give you another.'

The conductor stopped the bus. 'Until you give me a different two-anna piece, this bus will not move.'

Several Punjabis offered the conductor a selection of instructive and eloquent abuse. 'Damned Sindhis! Got Pakistan for nothing, the bastards. We shall set their manners right in two days.'

The conductor and driver stepped outside and stood apart. 'Damned Punjabis! They come here beaten and battered, but their brains never arrive. They climb straight onto our heads, sons of swine—as though this were their mother's husband's house.'

A Hindu passer-by stopped to hear this ode and, by way of appreciation, offered the conductor and driver a bidi each.

Two Bengalis descended from the bus to watch the commotion.

'How far is Lawrence Road?' one asked.

'Perhaps another two furlongs,' the other estimated.

'Come, let us walk.'

Once they had reached a safe distance, they commented freely upon the two-anna incident. 'Let the damned Sindhis and Punjabis fight. They say Urdu will be the language of Pakistan. Chi! As though our beautiful Bangla bhasha were not a national language!' At Saddar crossing, an Iranian hotel-keeper was roaring at a street hawker: 'You cannot keep these filthy bananas here. Ladies come to my hotel.'

'Get lost, hotel-boy!' the hawker shouted back. 'Does this pavement belong to your father?'

The Iranian-born hotel-keeper overturned the basket of bananas with one mighty kick. The hawker sprang forward and clung to his legs.

A constable arrived and struck the hawker hard across the mouth. 'Bastard! How many times have I told you not to set up your tray here? But you sons of whores never listen. Come on—to the police station.'

The hawker begged and pleaded. 'Officer, I came from Ajmer Sharif. My house and all I owned were looted. My blind sister is with me. Let me go. I shall never put my basket here again.'

But law is law. In the eyes of law there is no distinction between a man from Ajmer and one from Lahore, between a blind sister and a sighted one. The constable performed his official duty admirably and marched the hawker to the station. When the station officer heard about the blind sister, he grew furious at the constable's stupidity: why had the fool not brought her along as well?

'Two and two make four; four and three make seven; and seven and nine make—?' Chela Ram the broker asked Khushi Muhammad the broker.

Khushi Muhammad fished a fly from his tea and clinked the spoon against the cup. Dropping the half-dead creature to the floor, he took a long swallow.

'Seven and nine make sixteen,' Chela Ram completed the sum himself. 'I tell you, master, it has not been a bad season.'

Khushi Muhammad drew in his sagging lower lip and took another long drink of tea.

'Truth be told, friend, it was a cracking season.' The puckered hollows of Chela Ram's cheeks swelled with delight. 'Sixteen girls in one season!'

'By Ram, I never did such business in all my life.'

To express his inward satisfaction, Chela Ram removed his Jinnah cap, embroidered with crescent and star, and vigorously stroked his bald crown.

Khushi Muhammad's hanging lower lip drooped farther still. In response, he took an exceptionally prolonged sip of tea.

'You bastard, fortune sits in your lap,' Khushi Muhammad muttered. 'Girl after girl came floating to you. I could barely lay hands on three.'

'Three girls! Pah!' Chela Ram spat a great clot of phlegm upon the restaurant floor. 'Black, scrawny things. No hot-blooded customer would so much as raise an eye to them. Pah! I had priceless jewels, my friend: firm, full-bodied Punjabi women; delicate, supple girls from Delhi; and then that one from Patiala—ah, she was a diamond, Khushi Muhammad, a diamond!'

Chela Ram crushed a salted biscuit between his fingers.

'That damned Brown took her to Port Said. Said she would earn handsomely there. Tell me, Khushi Muhammad, which way is Port Said?'

'Somewhere or other.' Khushi Muhammad's trade had been slow. 'Order more tea. No damned refugee trains come any more.'

Over a second cup of hot tea, both men drifted back into their private worlds. Chela Ram the broker counted the priceless jewels that had slipped through his own hands and scattered across the earth. Cairo, London, Port Said—who knew what chambers his precious gifts now adorned? In some magnificent bedchamber the body of that Jat girl from Patiala must lie displayed like a bolster of silk and brocade. Strange desires lifted their heads in Chela Ram's heart. For a moment he longed to grow wings, fly to Port Said, and fling five hundred and seventy rupees in notes into that bastard Brown's face—

—take back the woman from Patiala, lift her dense, velvet-bolster body in his arms, and flee: battling storms, striking against the waves of the sea, cleaving the breasts of mountains. Meanwhile, smoke of grief and anger clouded the world of Khushi Muhammad the broker.

At first the damned refugees had arrived packed into aeroplanes; train after train came loaded with them. But for some days the market had been cold. Every day he read fresh news in the papers: blood in Delhi, blood in Cawnpore, blood in Calcutta, blood in Ahmedabad, blood in Ajmer—yet through all those floods of blood not one refugee train reached Karachi. Khushi Muhammad the broker felt the loss keenly. Still clinging to some indistinct hope, he spent six paisa on a paper and ran hungry eyes over the blazing headlines. The newsboy was splitting his throat with cries—

'Now it has begun in Kashmir too! Hundreds of thousands of Muslims slaughtered in Jammu!' Khushi Muhammad became all attention. Hellfire had broken out even in the paradise of Kashmir. Fire rained upon the saffron fields; sparks burned in the laps of flowers; in place of the spring breeze, Dogra swords were moving. Thousands had died, thousands were dying, thousands—hopping like frogs, crawling like rats—were trying to escape that furnace of hell.

Khushi Muhammad slapped Chela Ram hard upon the thigh. 'Now Kashmir has caught fire too, my friend. I say, Chela Ram—listen to this.'

Chela Ram was absorbed in Port Said. 'Then apples will become expensive?' he asked without interest.

But the soul of poetry had entered Khushi Muhammad. Smacking his lips, he described the delicate-bodied, silver-limbed women of Kashmir.

Beautiful, many-coloured women like flowering trees: apples in their cheeks, pears upon their breasts, grape-juice upon their lips; lotus blossoms dancing on the waters of Dal in their eyes; the music of mountain streams in their throats; rose and jasmine in every limb; the faint, sweet perfume of saffron. Saliva gathered at Chela Ram's mouth. He rubbed his eyes, sat upright, and ordered a third cup of tea for Khushi Muhammad. Then they bent their heads together and lost themselves in the promising bounty of the Kashmir season. A gust of wind shook the sail; a small turbulence rose upon the waves—

—the boat rocked, and the frightened girl pressed herself against the side of Seth Qaim Ali Daim Ali.

A tide of laughter surged through the Seth's belly, and the betel juice that had long been collecting in his mouth escaped like foul water from a sewer.

The old boatman lit a bidi and smiled. 'She came from Kashmir, Seth. She is blind. Tell me—where shall I take you? Paris or Venice?'

Seth Qaim Ali Daim Ali had an office in Paris, and had heard many enchanting things about that city. But he was certainly not prepared to undertake so long a journey in this little rocking boat. When the boatman invited him to Paris or Venice, he became flustered.

The cunning boatman smiled at his alarm. 'Do not be afraid, Seth. I shall not take you far. Ah, Paris—what a place! One look and you will die.' Keamari harbour was lively. Sunday crowds moved about in every direction. Some were going to Manora, some to Sandspit Island, while a ship weighed anchor for Bombay. Hundreds of coloured saris fluttered on the deck. People held binoculars to their eyes for a final glimpse of Karachi. As the ship departed, some removed Jinnah caps from their heads and threw them into the sea—

—then shook their fists in the air and cried, 'Jai Hind!' The blind Kashmiri girl, pressed against Seth Qaim Ali Daim Ali, sat deep in thought. Whenever the boat's breast trembled upon the heaving waves, she remembered her light shikara, which used to quiver just so upon the delicate waters of Dal and Wular. The first day she had drunk a palmful of seawater, it made her vomit—ugh, how bitter it was! The water of Dal had been sweet as fresh milk; and the water of Chashma Shahi—ah, as though milk, butter, and honey had been chilled upon ice. She longed to see this bitter lake once: was its water black or red, blue or green? But alas, her eyes.

Once their almond-shaped depths had held the fine blueness of Wular Lake and the tender coolness of unripe almonds. Now there were only deep wounds, like two blind, dark wells lost in a distant wilderness. She was blind, without light. One brave Dogra had demolished with his bayonet the enchanted palaces of colour built within her eyes. Far from the commotion of the shore, a black ship stood alone at sea. In large red letters it announced that it carried explosives.

As their boat passed close by, Seth Qaim Ali Daim Ali quickly released the girl's hand, suddenly afraid the explosives might erupt. Once they had moved a little farther away, he again took both her hands and placed them upon his belly.

The boat touched a small island where a few fishermen's huts stood. The boatman explained that this pleasure-resort was named Paris. Several other islands lay nearby; scattered boats rested along their shores. One was Venice, another

Naples, another Rome. The boatman opened the sail and rigged an awning over the boat. Then he winked at Seth Qaim Ali Daim Ali. 'There, Seth. I am off to catch fish. Enjoy the springtime of Kashmir at your leisure.' In the Eidgah ground, a Mina Bazaar had appeared. Every day was Eid here; every night, the Night of Deliverance. Tiny lamps flickered in little huts of sacking.

Meat and bread, stitched clothes, old boots, fresh fruit, iron nails, wooden boxes, leather chairs, oil, pickles, soap—the homeless, doorless refugees sat clutching every possible thread of support. A strange contentment, a strange eternity pervaded the scene, making one imagine that this caravan lost from life had at last arrived at its destination.

A sheet divided one hut into two parts. In front, Dilshad fried pakoras. Behind it, Zubaida sat heavily painted, waiting.

A tall, broad Pathan squatted before the fritters.

'Hot pakoras, Khan. Eat some. How much shall I give you?'

'Are they soft—and hot?' The Pathan winked.

'Yes, Khan. Soft—and hot.' Dilshad held the ladle before her face and smiled.

There was strange magic in Dilshad's smile. Drunk upon one such smile, Rahim Khan had sworn that if the sun, the moon, or the stars themselves carried her away, he would leap across the immensities of earth and heaven and wrest her back.

The Pathan ran his tongue over his lips. 'One rupee?'

'No, Khan. Five rupees.'

'Two and a half?'

'Five.'

The Pathan counted the money in his pocket. He had three rupees and four annas. He tried to leave the remaining one rupee and twelve annas on credit, but Dilshad insisted: 'Khan, debt is the scissors of love. Bring the full amount, and in a moment I shall take out soft, soft, hot, hot pakoras for you.'

Disappointed, the Pathan moved to the other side, where he struck the same bargain with Zubaida. She was still a child—ignorant, innocent—so she agreed to extend him credit for one rupee and twelve annas.

Zubaida called out, 'Sister, keep an eye on this side. Mahmood is asleep. I am going with Khan for a little while to collect the balance.'

In the same way, whenever Dilshad went with a customer to collect payment for her pakoras, she left her daughter in Zubaida's care. Upon this mixture of fritters and payment, the future of the world's greatest Islamic nation was growing to maturity. When Dilshad's daughter grew young and strong upon soft, hot pakoras; when Zubaida's Mahmood came of age upon the savour of these bargains, two invaluable members would be added to the brotherhood of Islam: one robust brother, one beautiful sister. Strength of body and beauty of body—what greater blessing could the Lord of all blessings and all majesty have bestowed upon you?

He is indeed Most Merciful and Most Tender. He is Lord of the east and Master of the west. He caused dates and pomegranates to grow upon the trees. He draws pearls and coral from the rivers. He is the Compassionate One of Paradise and the Subduer of Hell. Which, then, of your Sustainer's blessings will you deny?

A FEW WORDS ABOUT O GOD!

♦

When I reached Karachi in September 1947, a great flood of refugees—plundered, mutilated, and torn apart—was pouring into Pakistan from every direction. Somewhere among them was a very close relative of mine, together with his wife and children. Months earlier he had left the East Punjab village of Chamkaur Sahib with a caravan. We did not know whether he had reached Pakistan safely at all; and if he had, where he might be.

In searching for him, I examined almost every refugee camp, one after another and in considerable detail. Only those who passed through that furnace themselves can truly comprehend migration. One cannot understand its real meaning while sitting at home, preparing statistical returns within office walls, or listening to fiery speeches at meetings and processions. Nor, even in the refugee homes, can one hear in full the story of people sobbing, writhing, grinding their heels in death, and being plundered by stranger and kin alike. During my search, wrapped in sheets of cruelty, barbarism, and suffering—

—hundreds of thousands of refugees passed before my eyes. Among them were thousands of children and women, young and old. Dozens, writhing and weeping and beating their breasts, told me the grief-laden stories of their lives. This whole agonising experience smouldered within me until, one day, it assumed the form of Dilshad. One evening I sat down with a pen and, in a single sitting, rose at dawn having completed the story of O God!

This long story first appeared in the Riots Number of Naya Daur. Afterwards, friends insisted that it should also be issued as a novella in book form. The late Mrs Mumtaz Shirin kindly wrote a preface, and the first edition of O God! was published in Karachi in June 1948. Ordinary readers liked it so much that six editions appeared in rapid succession. A publisher in Lahore also did some business by changing the novella's title from O God! to After Freedom.

The moment O God! appeared in book form, a storm rose among the Progressive Writers. For several months, long critical articles against it appeared in

leading and influential journals. I did not consider it proper to answer any of them. I was certain that, if those critics were right, the story would soon die and be buried. Yet in the thirty-seven years since then, this has not happened. No one now remembers the hostile criticism, while edition after edition of O God! has continued to appear. There is no achievement of mine in this. It is God's grace and the generosity of readers.

At present, the book is especially popular among certain groups of young college students. Many boys and girls come to have me sign their copies of O God! Most ask in astonishment: 'Did our country truly pass through events such as those recorded in this book? If this is true, why do other writers not write about it?' And so on.

To cast light upon the past and present of O God!, I reproduce here three documents.

First:

Second:

Third:

A letter from Muhammad Hasan Askari to Mrs Mumtaz Shirin, dated 20 July 1948; Abul Fazl Siddiqi's essay, 'O God! and Its Preface', published in the August 1950 issue of Adab-e-Latif, Lahore; and the impressions of Azhar Sohail, a young journalist of Nawa-i-Waqt, published in the magazine sections of the Lahore, Rawalpindi, Multan, and Karachi editions from 29 March to 4 April 1985.

A LETTER FROM MUHAMMAD HASAN ASKARI

♦

To Mumtaz Shirin

Care of Maktaba-e-Jadid, Anarkali, Lahore

20 July 1948

Respected Madam, greetings.

It is half past one at night. I have just finished reading Qudrat Ullah Shahab's book O God! First of all, I congratulate you upon writing such a preface. You have expressed the truth with complete candour and without the slightest hesitation. I greatly admired the way you analysed human conduct during the riots—particularly your plain speaking about Krishan Chander. You have proved conclusively that your mind is free from every kind of prejudice and that you show neither fear nor favour. Our writers keep silent lest some Hindu friend take offence, or lest they themselves be regarded as reactionaries.

Whatever such fear may amount to from a national point of view, from a purely literary standpoint it is contemptible. I was exceedingly pleased to discover that at least one writer among us has acted honestly. I do not for one moment wish people to conceal their true opinions or distort reality merely for national advantage. If there truly exists among us a person who carries within himself a vision like Rimbaud's and prays for the destruction of Pakistan, then, despite disagreeing with him, I shall honour him above my head. I shall grant him complete freedom of expression—

—and be prepared to fight even the Quaid-e-Azam in defence of his right. What pains me is that our writers spread hatred—or at the very least suspicion—against Pakistan and the Muslims merely to please others, or at others' prompting. To obtain Pakistan, the votes of the masses were needed; the so-called intellectuals exercised no influence upon them. The people obtained Pakistan. But Pakistan cannot be consolidated by votes alone. That requires the intellectual

and moral exertion of the whole nation. From the smallest details of life to the greatest matters—

—how can stability be achieved without the complete effort of educated people? Yet our writers appear intent upon destroying Pakistan, not for any advantage of their own, but merely to earn medals for impartiality, liberalism, and progressivism. In these circumstances, it is a most auspicious sign that you have spoken on behalf of the Muslims and exposed the conspiracy being conducted against them beneath the cloak of literature. No amount of congratulation would be sufficient, for it is difficult enough to imagine any writer supporting the Muslims to such a degree.

Moreover, you have said nothing sentimental; you have stated simple truths as plain as two and two make four. I should not regard it as beneficial to Pakistan if Pakistani writers began supporting the nation or the government in every matter, or viewed everything only from the standpoint of national interest. What I desire is objectivity and genuine impartiality; in these I see the secret of the nation's true construction. You will know that 'committed literature' is much discussed in France nowadays. Concerning it, André Gide said—

'I count only on the deserter.' I am profoundly persuaded by that saying. If I dream of a glorious future for myself, I dream of it not as a loyalist but as a deserter. Yet I also remember that Gide served as secretary of the Writers' Resistance Committee in Africa. Later, when Monsieur Aragon demanded that Gide be prosecuted because he praised the conduct of German soldiers, even Gide was prepared, at such a delicate moment, to perform national service—for intellectual honesty required it then.

Among us, however, honesty is understood to mean only opposition to Pakistan. Those writers who, helplessly and against their inclination, have at last acknowledged Pakistan's existence wish to remain detached; indeed, they regard practical support for Pakistan as mere careerism. Some young writers here wished to form a new association of writers loyal to Pakistan. I was delighted. I persuaded Taseer Sahib to join. But when these young men approached Qayyum Nazar Sahib and others, they were told that Taseer and Askari were looking for government employment—

—and wished to create a writers' association merely to advertise themselves and strike a profitable bargain. Tell me: in such a world, what is a man to do or not do? The Progressives have spread the rumour that I receive money from the government. If one speaks, one must hear all this; yet how can one remain silent?

One cannot watch the nation die. Your writing astonished me. God grant that you write more often. The nation needs us now; let the antidote not arrive after the hour of death. I also greatly admired Qudrat Ullah Shahab's story. I would say—

—that this book ought to be in every Pakistani home. Should Shahab Sahib wish, he may use this opinion in the book's advertising. I am reviewing it in the newspaper Imroze and shall try to have it discussed in as many papers as possible. It is not, of course, an immortal story; but in view of its purpose it is highly successful. After all, in what sense is Vercors's The Silence of the Sea immortal—or other books of that kind? Yet such books have their place, and their authors' nations are rightly grateful to them. Shahab Sahib similarly deserves our gratitude.

The best thing is that he has spent less time depicting the cruelties of outsiders than those committed by our own people. The third part of the book is the finest and most powerful. The final scene, in particular, is beyond praise. I am preparing a detailed review.

Thank God the fog of progressivism has begun to lift from our minds. Please convey my congratulations to Shahab Sahib.

Do tell me what the literary atmosphere in Karachi is like. How many writers are Pakistani, and how many Progressive? I should be grateful for an early reply. Greetings to Samad Shahin Sahib.

Courtesy: Naya Daur, Karachi
Your devoted,
Muhammad Hasan Askari
Issues 79–80

O GOD! AND ITS PREFACE

Abul Fazl Siddiqi

♦

The faster the pace of literary creation, the more the output of genuinely individual artists seems to diminish. Urdu literature too has demonstrated this curious truth. Bedi, Krishan Chander, Ismat—and one or two other names may be added—stamped such individuality upon Urdu short fiction, and influenced those who followed with such abundance of thought and talent, that after 1943 almost every new writer remained lost within their worlds. After Annadata, Krishan Chander gradually inclined towards decline; Bedi made literature an occasional occupation—

—and when Ismat left the realm of sex for the world of workers and peasants, she fell behind even those who followed her. Such being the state of our literature, whenever an iconoclast of real substance rises, the high priests and ancient idols may rage and squirm, but a true critic cannot withhold applause. Qudrat Ullah Shahab is a major icon-breaker of the post-1943 period. His stories have not merely startled readers; they have spread a strange disorder through the ranks of idols and their worshippers. His latest story, O God!, is a milestone upon a road whose very approach makes heaven knows how many Lats and Manats, and how many priests of art, writhe in pain.

When I saw the anger directed at the story, I read it again. Perhaps I had been wrongly impressed; perhaps, being human, I had been swept away by emotion, lost in the grave and lurid colour of its subject, and had mistaken it for one of Urdu's finest stories—and the finest story written about the riots. Today, however, I can once more say with pride that not only was my first judgement correct; after a second, more deliberate reading, my opinion has become firmer.

Indeed, the second reading disclosed qualities I had missed before. I must now conclude that something else lies behind the anger—something requiring no explanation from me. Why this fury against O God!? When Sajjad Zaheer and

Ahmed Ali strike at old values in Angarey; when Krishan Chander exposes the fraud of mighty 'providers' in Annadata; when Ismat tears open the heavy curtain of Lihaaf; when Manto's furnace sends smoke from its fire-pit—you accept them as great artists, though members of a certain school writhe at those very stories. Yet when Qudrat—

—Ullah Shahab removes the dressings from the running sores of a poor, decaying society and exposes the gangrene of leprous politics, even those eagle-eyed gentlemen rebel who claim they can stare directly into a sun-bright truth. An artist cannot be bound by a handful of fixed mathematical formulae. If he is an artist—a true artist—he must enter life and its immensities directly. If, with newspaper statistics before him, he merely applies formulae of division and multiplication, multiplication and division, you may call him something else—

—but he is not an artist, and certainly not a Progressive writer. Progressivism recognises no expediency. Here wounds are not veiled and abscesses are not pressed shut; the artist lays them bare, however politics and prudence may scream and groan. In the true sense, the Progressive artist is an expert surgeon: he applies the scalpel with a single clean stroke.

The fault-finding directed at Qudrat Ullah Shahab seems to me criticism untouched by even the breeze of literature, though it certainly bears the marks of extremely deep political calculation. When its authors claim that their objections rest upon literary principles, one longs to leave the pleasure-house of storytelling and enter the field of criticism carrying a pen sharper than a sword, a pen that might put an end to this filthy criticism. I am a short-story writer and novelist. Creative literature has greater importance for me; therefore I can neither make criticism my literary occupation—

—nor can my frail shoulders bear a monopoly over deciding the fortunes of every old and new poet and writer. I do not wish to say anything about those who speak against Qudrat Ullah Shahab; yet I consider it essential to say a few things about Shahab himself. My literary honesty and artistic sincerity repeatedly urge me that, amid this uproar—when the distinction between black and white has vanished from every sphere of the world—it is not merely our literary but our moral duty to preserve at least the clear spray of literature's spring from every adulteration. At such a moment, silence itself is a grave—

—artistic crime.

Seeing Qudrat Ullah Shahab's fiction and my own name together, readers may at first expect some new arrow to fly from this essay's quiver. They will be

disappointed. Here is a servant of literature belonging to their own camp, one whose faith in progressivism is complete, yet who—upon the basis of those very principles—does not care how many voices in his circle have already spoken the opposite, and is prepared today to utter an unwelcome truth.

The commotion prompted me to read nearly all Shahab's earlier, well-known stories. For two or three years I have tried to read attentively the work of every old and new short-story writer. I remember clearly how few stories truly satisfy literary and fictional standards. In my inadequate judgement, their number is very small. Among that handful are several born of Qudrat Ullah Shahab's originality and power of thought.

The first quality that impresses us in Shahab is the completeness with which the writer's personality rises before us and grows clearer as the story proceeds. This quality has made him not only a successful storyteller, but a stylist, a sensitive poet, and an individual prose artist. In the fullness of his gifts he is a great artist of Asia: he offers pleasant draughts of tenderness and sweetness; within his sleeves lie sharp lancets of satire and poisoned arrows of reproach; upon his turban flutter the coloured pennants of dignity and polished elegance.

These qualities distinguish him from writers who believe that presenting a good idea in a flat and lifeless manner is the highest virtue and felicity. I too believe in the 'good idea'; but presenting a good idea badly is scarcely better than presenting a bad one. Literary subjects are not infinitely various. Writers of one age possess broadly similar experience and reading. What gives their creations distinction is the manner of presentation. Communication is of immense importance in literature. However excellent your subject—

—if the mode of expression is clumsy, the subject alone cannot give life to your work. Subject and expression are related as body and soul, and must exist in harmonious proportion. Among those writers who have understood the relation of matter and art is this young storyteller. When I first encountered Shahab's stories in the literary world, the unfamiliarity of his name did not prevent his individuality from impressing me. In his earliest pieces I saw emerging the literary iconoclast of the near future. I have not yet met this young artist, despite my desire to do so; yet in his stories he meets us in such a way—

—that the thirst for personal meeting is at once partly satisfied and made more intense. I cannot say whether meeting Qudrat Ullah Shahab will bring disappointment or delight. But there is no doubt that the Shahab who walks alive before us in his stories, who within his books is—

'a garden of flowers, a reed-bed of lament, a whole house of voices'—now laughing a poisoned laugh, now smiling with the delicate smile of spring buds; now raining fire, now scattering blossoms—that Qudrat Ullah Shahab surely deserves our love.

I use the word 'love' after careful thought. Shahab does not impress us by forcing his characters upon us. More than the characters themselves, his manner of expression places the storyteller's own personality upon our shoulders. This is a strange aspect of Shahab's immense artistry, and in this particular quality he appears alone among our contemporaries. In his literary creations he does not manifest himself as a venerable guide or prophet before whom our sole duty is to kneel in reverence; nor as a swaggering soldier so quick with the sword that we constantly fear being wounded—

—nor as a schoolmaster lecturing with pointer in hand before a blackboard. The Shahab of these stories comes before us as a friend; and when he departs, he leaves behind a fresh intimacy, a new harmony, a deeper sincerity.

While reading Shahab's stories we cease to feel ourselves. His narration casts such a spell that, not merely in thought but almost physically, we feel him walking with an arm around our neck, leading us through his world: the world of Talaash, where the helpless human soul cries, 'Shall I never find true love?'; where Sab ka Malik sows harvests of hunger in the humming valleys of Bengal; where a woman twists and dances before her master, inflaming the lust of the lustful only so that she may escape the claws of starvation into the black hem of desire.

That world turns before us like a cinema screen upon the axes of Jal Tarang, Stenographer, Gharib Khana, Ek Raat ki Baat, Mama, and Duranga. In these stories we encounter formidable satire. Its sharpness not only draws Shahab out of the lane of romanticism; it smashes the little houses of despair as well. Shahab possesses a marked personal individuality, but not the kind found among ordinary individualist writers. The suffocation, bitterness, and obscurity that distinguish them are wholly absent from Shahab.

Nowhere does he retreat from social consciousness. Shahab's stories were written while living among society's people and striking his own problems against theirs. They contain the real human being, walking and breathing. His characters are not creatures of dream; they represent a class—the class inwardly deprived of happiness, whose white clothes conceal bodies covered in wounds; where hideous patches of leprosy compel us to shut our eyes; where hungry bellies shelter

beneath smart coats; where the spiritual and physical leprosy of 'foresight' assaults sight and smell with inward and outward decay.

Here men's beloveds adorn other men's beds, while the heroes themselves spend their nights with the wives and daughters of office clerks and orderlies. Woman! A purse stuffed with rupees! The full body of a girl! This is the world into which Shahab leads us. Arriving there, we close our eyes by natural instinct; sometimes we thrust fingers into our nostrils. Now he dazzles our vision, now overturns our sense of smell, and still leads us onward. In nausea and palpitation, we follow.

This is a world whose sight awakens disgust, hatred, and revulsion in every vein; a world under whose law everything is lawful, from pork to a kite's egg. Shahab does not lead us from coloured palace to coloured palace, from hall of mirrors to hall of mirrors. His world contains Gharib Khana—the Poor House—where people scramble over platters like dogs; where we meet old women crawling like frogs, trembling old men, children with swollen bellies that rumble, whimpering skeletons, and adolescent girls who must satisfy sexual hunger in order to satisfy the hunger of the stomach.

The Poor House is a place where everyone—from the master of the house to the water-carrier and sweeper—claims a right over every young girl. When an untutored maiden flees her own world and seeks refuge in Shahab's Poor House, a naked savage beast stands at the far end of every rope of support. When Kamini Kaushal escapes the claws of her Thakur and comes here seeking shelter, then, in Shahab's words, she collides with something and falls upon her face.

From beginning to end, Shahab walks with an arm around our neck. With a gesture of the finger here, a lift of the eyebrow there, now whispering softly into the ear, he shows us everything and tells it all in an astonishingly steady gait: 'Come, look—this is my world: a world piled with refuse; a world of social hunger, political hunger, economic hunger, sexual hunger, and the hunger for domination.' As though relating the most ordinary matter, without smile or smallest crease upon his brow, with devastating irony, he coats the spectator's throat with layer upon layer of quinine and moves grandly on.

Reading these stories, I felt that Shahab possesses tremendous unconscious courage and a God-given audacity. He has come with David's miracle in his fingers: iron softens like wax and is kneaded into whatever chain he desires. The subject he has chosen offers no beauty or charm, only disfiguring patches of leprosy; the flowing pus of spiritual and physical disease, around which swarms of

flies hum; clouds of poverty's darkness; the night of sin. This is a most delicate terrain.

When a writer admits such things into fiction, he must remain agile and employ his gifts to the full, for the subject's lack of poetry and colour—the repulsiveness of character and setting—can prevent readers from beginning, let alone reading with interest. I too would never have read Shahab's stories had they not contained immense sincerity and a style alive with such astonishing force. Shahab's living style and heartfelt eloquence illuminate this dark world and render it so bearable that one cannot help wishing to love him.

To write of Kashmir's paradisal valleys or Punjab's broad fields, and create pleasure by stirring sexual emotion, is a common custom and an easy recipe. But to present such a hideous world and make us walk through it shoulder to shoulder as though touring studios in Hollywood and Bombay, or valleys in Switzerland and Kashmir—among today's story writers, only Qudrat Ullah Shahab's fingers possess that miracle. I say this without prejudice. Tell me yourself: if the colourful valleys of Kashmir were taken from Krishan Chander—

—if the humming, sunlit plains of Punjab were taken from Nadeem; if the green slopes of Dehradun and Simla were removed from Shafiq-ur-Rahman; if Ismat, Manto, and Mufti had no nervous tension—would you read their stories? It is a great question, one that requires reckless courage to ask and a stout heart to answer. It is easy to become popular by writing upon beautiful and emotional themes. To probe repellent subjects and still become popular and beloved belongs to Shahab's pen alone.

Such a pen cannot be granted unless the storyteller's personality contains the same bold grace, compassion, and sincerity that live within Shahab.

Now, a few words about O God! This story not only surpasses all Shahab's earlier work; it may be counted among the finest stories in Urdu. Just as Krishan Chander's Annadata is the fullest and most effective of the stories about the Bengal famine, so Qudrat Ullah Shahab's O God! stands among the stories of the riots. O God! is king of the riot stories. It contains such immense realism and so fierce a spirit that certain prudent writers have pronounced sentences of apostasy and unbelief upon it. Among the handful of works that profoundly affect a reader in a lifetime, O God! is one.

Yet when I saw the articles by Zahir Babar and Mujtaba Hussain, I feared I might have wandered onto the wrong road—perhaps emotion had carried me into reaction. But after reading the preface to O God! and those articles, I realised

that neither had much connection with the story itself. The preface spoke of something other than O God!, while the articles discussed the preface more than the story and attacked the preface-writer more than the author. One gains the impression that poor Qudrat Ullah—

—Shahab has been used as an instrument by one side and, by the other, ground like a weevil with the wheat between two millstones. Arrows and lancets have been shot at him under the impulse of some other passion, and the filthy germs of communalism have been sought within this matchless story. It is true that, upon first seeing the frame, one may imagine that—as in a crafty politician's picture—only one face has been shown. Yet I have not the slightest doubt of the artist's sincerity. His pen has reflected only those feelings attached to a character representing a particular class within a particular environment.

In the communal riots that swept India and Pakistan, the distinction between oppressor and oppressed collapsed. There were oppressors on this side and oppressors on that; and neither side can justify cruelty by arguing over who struck first. Those who perished beneath cries of 'Har Har Mahadev!' and 'Allahu Akbar!' were victims who cannot be separated from one another. If a writer truthfully depicts the victims of his own environment, how can that mean that no victims exist beyond its limits? The Progressive standpoint requires us—

—to judge whether the artist has lied, ignored an unwelcome fact while representing his environment, or indulged in excess or deficiency. Those who discover the garments of communalism in Shahab's story are averting their eyes from reality. Reality remains reality, whether its presentation makes hair stand on end or turns the throat bitter. Its bitterness and sourness cannot be sweetened by command. Only those find the worms of sectarianism in O God! who are either slaves to expediency, or who sat far from the world of fire and blood during the riots, gathering information through the press—

—forming opinions, observing through newspaper telescopes, and writing stories. With a cheap and heavy-handed prudence, they balanced oppressors and victims on both sides and carried out fourth-rate propaganda for reconciliation between the two communities. Their motive need not be condemned; it contains at least a superficial innocence. If it can improve the nation's condition and cool the flames of hatred, it should certainly be attempted. But it is meaningless to expect every artist to change his temperament, don a shell of moderation and balance, and assist them in this worthy task.

A writer of cool disposition may do so. But how can a fiery, impetuous young artist like Shahab, who values sincerity so highly that he does not hesitate to search even his own person? To expect such a writer to dip the point of his pen in the ice of expediency rather than the fire of truth is futile. His earlier stories demonstrate that—

—the elements of compromise cannot be produced within him.

He is compelled by the sacred fire that bursts within an artist at the sight of flames consuming humanity. Without that eruption Shahab cannot live. In O God!, the fire of his feeling reaches its summit. Yet people misunderstood his broad human compassion and, in confusion, called him communal. I continue to wonder, and one thought repeatedly troubles me: all this wrath descended upon Qudrat Ullah Shahab because Muhammad Hasan Askari and Mumtaz Shirin praised him. Otherwise, O God! is of the same order as Khwaja Ahmad Abbas's Sardarji.

Indeed, I would say that Sardarji leaves a sense of incompleteness. It offers neither a fully realised character nor an atmosphere from which we can analyse the setting and become convinced of what the artist wishes to say. Its final portion is so unnatural and lifeless that the author's prudence and attempt at balance are exposed in a painfully obvious manner; the story becomes a childish effort that mocks itself. The hatred of Sikhs awakened at the beginning is not dispelled by the ending, because that ending—

—is very weak and rattles like a toy used to pacify children. A careful reading of Shahab's story reveals a living scene and a beautiful consistency of atmosphere from beginning to end. Its analysis not only reveals the true background of the riots but produces hatred for that hideous environment. To awaken and illuminate that hatred is the author's greatest aim. Perhaps Progressive critics, while writing on the story, forget Lenin's saying: 'If you wish to change your environment, first learn to hate its structure.'

When Qudrat Ullah Shahab awakens hatred, is his act not perfectly Progressive? The germs of communalism cannot be destroyed merely by sitting in Delhi's Government House and conducting peace talks. The roots of the riots lie not only in religion or belief; many forces operate beneath them. Those forces are alike on both sides, and together they create the environment. Until hatred is directed at those fundamental forces, the veil cannot be torn from the setting and the original germs cannot be destroyed. The greatest artistic achievement of the author of O God! is this:

after reading it, we do not awaken to hatred of Hindus or Sikhs as communities. Our attention is directed less towards the man who thrusts the dagger than towards the act of thrusting it—towards savagery and barbarism. We do not sympathise deeply with Dilshad because she is Muslim or the daughter of Mullah Ali Bakhsh. Shahab's sincerity presents her so that, while reading, we entirely forget who she is. We see only an innocent girl being torn apart by wild beasts. The magic of the narration awakens in us such hatred for their demonic act, and such sympathy for her suffering—

—that we arm ourselves against the elements of evil. This is an artist's highest achievement: his purpose becomes absorbed within the reader. When signs of pregnancy appear in Dilshad, her condition becomes pitiable and we sob, yet scarcely remember that the violence has fallen upon a woman who recites the Muslim creed. Before our eyes, Dilshad becomes that crawling creature called 'woman': woman helpless and constrained, goddess of chastity, whose womb—the sacred casket—has been chosen by the Absolute Creator to hold the trust of His creative masterpiece.

Dilshad's child does not appear merely as illegitimate offspring; it is the living embodiment of savagery and barbarism, born when lust-driven beasts in human form destroy the whole inheritance of human civilisation to quench their desire. If Dilshad were named Gita or Sita, no essential difference would arise. If Amrik Singh and Darbar Singh were called Shahbaz Khan and Gulzar Khan, the surroundings might change slightly, but Gita and Sita's victimhood would be of the same nature as Dilshad's, and their illegitimate children would likewise cast—

—an arrow of scorn in the name of humanity, crying: 'O respectable Indian gentleman, look at us! We are the black stains you have dripped upon the bright white page of the twentieth century's constitutional and moral world—stains whose like, outside India, cannot be found elsewhere in this century despite two great world wars.'

Reading O God! and analysing its atmosphere awakens in the reader a broad human compassion. Its foundation is not Sikh and Muslim but oppressor and oppressed. Its characters act according to their environment. Place that environment in the United Provinces, Bihar, Bengal, Assam, or Sindh: its foundation will not change. Dilshad alone will change her name. In one place she will be Gita, in another Sita, elsewhere Saeeda or Ruqayya; but around her a pack of beasts will still be seen mercilessly tearing flesh from humanity's naked, unshrouded, unburied corpse.

Tell me, then, what injustice—and what contempt for the writer's labour—it is to look through a special pair of spectacles and see Dilshad only as a Muslim. The sincerity of O God!, and the demands of Progressive criticism, require us to see her simply as a woman: an oppressed, helpless woman. If quarrels between mosque and gurdwara rise in a critic's own heart while he sympathises with Dilshad, he should not lay the thief in his heart at the author's door. No literary sign of such communal intent appears in the work. There is, however, another regrettable matter.

When publishing this story, Qudrat Ullah Shahab asked Mumtaz Shirin to write a preface. She did not show the sincerity towards author and work that one would expect from an artist of her distinction and stature. Rather than devote her critical powers to the story's merits and defects, she displayed the force of her pen against the Progressives. It is astonishing that only two years earlier, when she sat down to survey short fiction, Krishan Chander appeared to her a god of storytelling. Even in his most worthless stories she discovered subtleties and offered interpretations—

—that left the poor author biting his finger, wondering whose composition it was; the disciples seemed to fly higher than the masters. Yet the moment she separated from the Progressive movement, she began discovering worms even in Krishan Chander's Annadata, though previously she had praised it from many angles. One cannot tell whether literature underwent a transformation or she herself was transfigured, but suddenly all efforts by Progressive artists seemed to her mechanical and lifeless. She became so active in searching for occasions to declare this that she lost the distinction between appropriate and inappropriate.

From a thinker and critic such as Shirin, we expected a serious examination of O God! worthy of her elevated gifts and learning. Comparisons of 'Sher Shah's greatness' against 'Salim Shah's greatness' are hardly admirable criticism. To turn prefaces and reviews into literary wrestling-pits is no service to letters. Every person is free in speech and action. She is entirely at liberty to strangle six years of her own literary service and rank M. Aslam and Qaisi Rampuri above Bedi and Krishan Chander—

—but it was wrong in principle to drag Qudrat Ullah Shahab into that arena and set him against Bedi and Krishan Chander. By placing garlands of devotion around Shahab and writing a preface implying that O God! means one thing while 'Saadi is another matter', she has treated him exactly as the foolish friend who proves more dangerous than an enemy. For personal purposes she has used a

great artist as an instrument. Whether her purpose succeeds or fails, the artist's meaning is bound to suffer. I therefore invite all who study literature sincerely to examine O God! for themselves.

With folded hands I request Progressive critics to read O God!—and works like it—without first inspecting the certificates attached as reviews and prefaces. They ought to have read Shahab's masterpiece after removing the labels of Mumtaz Shirin's preface and Askari's review. They would then have discovered that, at least up to O God!, Qudrat Ullah Shahab sings in harmony with them and belongs in their own ranks. Mumtaz Shirin wishes to set him against them and drag him from the line of Krishan Chander and Bedi into that of M. Aslam and Qaisi Rampuri.

Here I complain against the Progressive critics. Merely because O God! carried a preface by Mumtaz Shirin, they washed away all its virtues and delivered, in emotion and obstinacy, a verdict that is not only intellectually and literarily dishonest but directly opposed to Progressive principles. These people had probably seen O God! earlier in the Riots Number and may even have admired it. The poor fellows felt the need to attack it only when Mumtaz Shirin's introduction was added. This is what is called cutting off one's own nose to spite another's bad omen.

Let me say once more: there is no doubt that the preface to O God! carries the aspect of a conspiracy. But to deny the greatness of the original masterpiece on that account—and not merely deny it, but call its virtues defects—is itself no less an act of literary dishonesty than the one employed in preparing the preface. I am therefore compelled to place those ‘Progressive’ reviewers beside the reactionary preface-writer.

My dear sirs, progressivism required that the preface-writer's design be exposed and that the author of O God! be identified, at least in this work, as a true interpreter of the Association's principles—an artist now being exploited for a particular purpose. Before I end, I ask both preface-writer and reviewers to reconsider their conduct. In particular, those reviewers who belong to the Progressive Writers' Association should show some sporting spirit, read O God! with justice, forgive the story for the offence of having provoked opinions from Mumtaz Shirin and Askari—

—and write their reviews again. Criticism is not my field; within it I am no more than a newcomer. I have therefore written nothing worthy of a great artist such as Qudrat Ullah Shahab or a matchless masterpiece such as O God!, and the

truth is that, by failing to offer a proper critique, I have not discharged the obligation. Yet if the author, preface-writer, or reviewers reflect upon what I have written, I shall count it my good fortune and a favourable sign for Urdu literature.

Abul Fazl Siddiqi's essay is not the first critical article on Qudrat Ullah Shahab's O God! Much had already been written about this long story, and several eminent critics had examined it in the light of their principles. The irony is that, in every critique we have seen, subsidiary disputes have been made more prominent than the work itself. It would scarcely be wrong to say that none of the critics of O God! has yet displayed the thoughtfulness and seriousness required of a critical essay. After reading some pieces—

—one concludes that the respected critics are not criticising O God! at all, but its preface and the critical tendencies of its preface-writer. There is nothing objectionable in discussing a book's preface. But to ignore the text and treat the preface as the whole book—or to form an opinion from the preface and then judge the work's merits and defects in that light—is unjustifiable for any conscious writer or critic. It is unworthy of a responsible critic to be so influenced by a preface that he cannot consider the work itself seriously.

Siddiqi Sahib divided his essay into three parts. In the first, he discussed the literary stature of Qudrat Ullah Shahab, author of O God!

The second part concerned the heroine of O God!

In the third, he turned to the book's preface and appealed to critics to read the work without being influenced by the article of the editor of Naya Daur, so that they might recognise its virtues in their true meaning.

The task the essayist assumed was simply to review O God! and establish the book's greatness in detail. Yet the subject he was meant to discuss receives only limited attention, while other matters expand—and in an emotional manner.

The essayist stresses that critics and other readers should resist the influence of the preface and seek to understand the book's qualities by reading it. Yet he himself devotes several long paragraphs to the preface and related matters. It appears that he too could not remain uninfluenced by it. In that case, why was the appeal necessary? A critic does not allow himself to be overcome by emotion in this way.

The plain truth is that O God! has still not received a proper critical assessment. Irrelevant issues have become so entangled that the original spirit of

the book has disappeared from view.

—Editor
Courtesy: Adab-e-Latif, Lahore, August 1950

AS IT PASSED BEFORE MY EYES

Azhar Sohail

♦

This happened long ago—perhaps in 1959. I was then a pupil in the fifth class. My father brought home a small book, and I saw that, while reading it, he suddenly began to weep. The first chance I found, I stole the book from his cupboard and began reading. It was a slender volume, finished within an hour; but it did not make me cry.

Four years ago, I read the book again. This time tears came to my eyes.

Then, like a sudden flash of lightning, the truth was revealed to me: this book makes you weep only when your consciousness has fully matured. The book was O God!, and its author Qudrat Ullah Shahab—Qudrat Ullah Shahab, once a pillar of the Indian Civil Service, later a pillar of considerable height in the Civil Service of Pakistan, and now, in the company of Mumtaz Mufti, founder and architect of a whole Sufi order called 'Shahabia'. Upon his fine, bookish face he has also grown a semi-clerical beard. Curiously, contrary to the usual habit of Sufis, he has become still more tender-hearted and still more soft-spoken.

To see him and hear him today brings irresistibly to mind this couplet of Saib:

> *'Humility is the sign of those who have attained perfection;*
> *when the rider reaches his destination, he dismounts.'*

> *There is such modesty and self-effacement in him that one can scarcely believe this man was once a formidable and celebrated government officer. Gentle in speech, ardent in the quest—we did not see him in battle, but in company he appeared pure of heart and pure in conduct.*

All his life he has continued to astonish those connected with him: when he was Secretary to the President of Pakistan; when he was Secretary of Information;

when he left government service and took a post at UNESCO; and when, one day, it became known that he had quietly made a journey to Israel as well. On that occasion his late friend Ibn-e-Insha wrote a column whose heading was this line:

> *'The things Qudrat Ullah Shahab tells are like things told in dreams!'*
>
> *Even now he speaks as though out of dream and imagination. One can scarcely believe that a personality of such tremendous force is hidden within a thin, delicate figure like a line from a masnavi. His stature is brief, but his story long. It contains the uproar of storms and the assault of passions. We have never learned anything from days gone by or ages departed. Perhaps this story too will leave no mark—but listen, at least, to how many warnings and apocalypses lie concealed within it: the story of Qudrat Ullah Shahab, in his own voice.*
>
> *'I tell you all that eloquence requires;*
> *whether you take counsel from my words—or weariness—is yours.'*
>
> Azhar Sohail

Courtesy: Nawa-i-Waqt, Lahore, Rawalpindi, Multan, and Karachi editions, Magazine Section, 29 March–4 April 1985